



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **THESIS**

### **MILLENNIAL JIHADISM AND TERRORISM IN FRANCE**

by

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March 2019

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<b>REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE</b>			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503.				
<b>1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)</b>	<b>2. REPORT DATE</b> March 2019	<b>3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED</b> Master's thesis		
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> MILLENNIAL JIHADISM AND TERRORISM IN FRANCE			<b>5. FUNDING NUMBERS</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Craig A. Thompson				
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000			<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> N/A			<b>10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.				
<b>12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.			<b>12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE</b> A	
<b>13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words)</b> <p>The volume of extreme Islamic-inspired attacks in France in 2012–2016, the hundreds of French foreign fighters supporting the Islamic State's ruthless violence in the Levant, and the low level of assimilation to mainstream French culture by young French Muslims have quickly become major concerns for the security and stability of France. The French Republic is a European sovereign nation with inclusive immigration policies, an active proponent of full assimilation for minorities and immigrants, and a non-participant in the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. The French government and the nation's citizens therefore did not anticipate this spate of jihadist terrorism. This thesis investigates the large-scale terror attacks, including the backgrounds and motivations of the perpetrators, and then assesses relevant analytical explanations by prominent French scholars of the increase in religion-inspired violence in France in 2012–2016. Scholars' views differ on the origins of radicalization and terrorist behavior, and notably in regard to the role of religion in terms of social alienation and marginalization. By neutralizing the disruptive message at the source, deradicalizing the French prison system, and properly censoring the online channels of manpower recruitment, the French government can enhance its ability to prevent the infection of today's youth by this radical doctrine of salvation.</p>				
<b>14. SUBJECT TERMS</b> al-Qaeda, extremism, ideology, Islamic State, jihad, nihilism, Radical Islam, Salafi-Jihadism, terrorism, violent extremist organization			<b>15. NUMBER OF PAGES</b> 99	
			<b>16. PRICE CODE</b>	
<b>17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT</b> Unclassified	<b>18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE</b> Unclassified	<b>19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT</b> Unclassified	<b>20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b> UU	

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**MILLENNIAL JIHADISM AND TERRORISM IN FRANCE**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES  
(EUROPE AND EURASIA)**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The volume of extreme Islamic-inspired attacks in France in 2012–2016, the hundreds of French foreign fighters supporting the Islamic State’s ruthless violence in the Levant, and the low level of assimilation to mainstream French culture by young French Muslims have quickly become major concerns for the security and stability of France. The French Republic is a European sovereign nation with inclusive immigration policies, an active proponent of full assimilation for minorities and immigrants, and a non-participant in the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. The French government and the nation’s citizens therefore did not anticipate this spate of jihadist terrorism. This thesis investigates the large-scale terror attacks, including the backgrounds and motivations of the perpetrators, and then assesses relevant analytical explanations by prominent French scholars of the increase in religion-inspired violence in France in 2012–2016. These scholars’ views differ on the origins of radicalization and terrorist behavior, and notably in regard to the role of religion in terms of social alienation and marginalization. By neutralizing the disruptive message at the source, deradicalizing the French prison system, and properly censoring the online channels of manpower recruitment, the French government can enhance its ability to prevent the infection of today’s youth by this radical doctrine of salvation.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

AQ	Al Qaeda
AQAP	Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula
AQI	Al Qaeda in Iraq
EU	European Union
EUROPOL	European Union Agency for Law Enforcement
GIA	Groupe Islamique Armé
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
UMP	Union for a Popular Movement

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

First, I would like to convey my heartfelt appreciation to my advisor team, Dr. David Yost and Dr. Maria Rasmussen. I deeply appreciate their continuous support and guidance throughout this research project. Their patience, enthusiasm, and immeasurable professionalism helped guide me through this seemingly insurmountable task. I could not imagine having a better team of advisors; I am forever grateful.

In addition to my advisor team, I would be remiss if I did not thank my wife, Tammy. She has always been the family's rock and kept everything at home in perfect equilibrium during crunch time when I needed to be at work and hyper-focused. As has always been the case throughout my military career, I could not have done this without her support.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

A new era of terror in France began in 2012 when a French citizen with ethnic ties to North Africa went on a killing spree in the south of the country. The subsequent sequence of attacks illustrated a new and more sinister level of religious-inspired violence in the French homeland. Homegrown extremists, born and raised or naturalized and inculcated into French culture and society conducted these attacks. These attacks, exceptionally violent and claimed by known terrorist organizations, sent a shockwave of terror into the heart of the French Republic. Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) enthusiastically applauded and emphatically claimed these unprecedented and sadistically vicious attacks.

The violence escalated dramatically in January 2015, when three French citizens conducted a well-coordinated assault against the satire magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Each of these Frenchmen—radical extremists—fought to his death against local law enforcement.<sup>1</sup> Later that same year, the violence escalated yet again. The terrorist attacks on the Stade de France and the Bataclan Concert Hall in Paris represented a new level of violence, one not witnessed in France since the Nazi occupation of World War II. The violence reached its zenith in 2016 with the catastrophic attack directed against the crowds gathering to celebrate Bastille Day on the Promenade des Anglais in the southern French city of Nice. When all these large-scale and religiously inspired terrorist attacks concluded, jihadists were responsible for taking the lives of more than 247 people and injuring more than 800.<sup>2</sup> These homegrown terrorists, responsible for the large-scale jihadi violence in France from 2012 to 2016, represented a new demographic of terrorism, a younger population of French citizens responsible for committing Islamic-inspired violence against their own government.

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<sup>1</sup> Angelique Chrisafis, “Charlie Hebdo Attackers: Born, Raised and Radicalised in Paris,” *The Guardian*, 2–3, January 12, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/12/-sp-charlie-hebdo-attackers-kids-france-radicalised-paris>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Neiberg, “No More Elsewhere: France Faces the New Wave of Terrorism,” *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2017): 24–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1302736>; Chrisafis, “Charlie Hebdo Attackers,” 2–3; Gilles Kepel, *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2015), XV.

## **A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION**

The primary research question this thesis endeavored to answer is why France experienced a spate of Islamic-inspired terrorism in 2012–2016. Have French secular government policies, societal conditions, and rising nationalist sentiments served as causal factors for this rise in jihadi terrorism? To what extent have acts of terrorism been perpetrated by marginalized youths from second-generation immigrant families from North Africa? Have individuals been radicalized through the Internet or interactions in prisons, gangs, and terror cells? What roles have religious ideology and Salafist Islam played in motivating terrorists in France? What are the similarities and differences between this bout of Salafi-Jihadism and France’s experience with religion-inspired terrorism in the 1990s? What do these parallels and variances signify, and why should they be assessed?

This thesis analyzes French interpretations of the causes and characteristics of terrorism in 2012–2016 and compares those attributes and enablers with France’s first wave of Islamic-inspired terrorism in the 1990s. This thesis endeavors to provide a deeper understanding of the documented stages and developments that led to the acts of terrorism committed in France in 2012–2016. The key characteristics of the “millennial jihadi” and postmodern terrorism in France are identified, the individual, structural, pathological, and religious elements that contribute to radicalization and violence are specified, this new spate of terror is compared to the previous violence experienced in the late 20th century at the hands of the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA), and finally, the significance of continuity and change relative to Islamic terror in France is explored.

## **B. FRAMING PRINCIPAL TERMS AND IDEAS**

### **1. Terrorism**

Although experts in the terrorism milieu can rarely agree on an exact definition of the term, a quorum has emerged that tends to agree with Bruce Hoffman, a Georgetown University professor and prominent theorist in the field of terrorism, and his interpretation of the evasive meaning of terrorism. Hoffman defines terrorism as “violence—or, equally important, the threat

of violence—used and directed in pursuit of, or in service of, a political aim.”<sup>3</sup> Maria Moyano expressed “several objections” to this purely political definition and pointed out that “terrorism has been a feature of a variety of social conflicts—labor struggles, peasant wars, pre-and post-civil war situations.”<sup>4</sup> The term has been so muddled that preeminent scholars of the terrorism milieu have struggled mightily to put the term into context and have failed to develop a comprehensive definition of the contested term. Walter Laqueur, a world-renowned expert and author on terrorism, concluded, “no all-embracing definition will ever be found for the simple reason that there is not one terrorism, but there have been many terrorisms, greatly differing in time and space, in motivation, and in manifestations and aims.”<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the U.S. Department of Defense joint publication on terrorism defines the term as “the unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political.”<sup>6</sup> This definition represents a more inclusive and applicable explanation that does a satisfactory job of framing modern terrorist motives, actions, and end states. This definition guided the research effort concerning France’s involvement with jihadi violence in the 1990s and again in 2012–2016.

## **2. Millennial Jihadi**

Although “generational cutoff points aren’t an exact science,” remarks Michael Dimock, the term millennial is inclusive to “anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (ages 23 to 38 in 2019).”<sup>7</sup> Most millennials experienced and vividly remember the massive terrorist attacks at the turn of the century and have lived in the shadows of war and contestation in the Middle East

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 2–3.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Jose Moyano, *Argentina’s Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle, 1969–1979* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Laqueur, “Terrorism: A Brief History,” *Journal USA* (May 11, 2007): 1, <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itps/0507/ijpe/laqueur.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-07.2—Antiterrorism* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2010), GL–6.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), January 17, 2019, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

most of their formative years and into early adulthood. This violence has often spilled over into surrounding areas and habitually influenced these millennials on a personal level; this generation is familiar with, and often insensitive to, intense violence. Also, of consequence, the majority of these millennials entered the work force at the height of economic crises when unemployment was high, pay was low, and the economy was in a free fall. “As is well documented,” Dimock points out, “many of Millennials’ life choices, future earnings and entrance to adulthood have been shaped by this recession in a way that may not be the case for their younger counterparts.”<sup>8</sup> Millennials, well known for their proficiency with all things Internet, social media, and computer-related, can easily and expertly navigate the many complexities of online mediums and the vast supply of available information that interests them. “The implications of growing up in an ‘always on’ technological environment are only now coming into focus. Recent research has shown dramatic shifts in youth behaviors, attitudes and lifestyle—both positive and concerning—for those who came of age in this era,” Dimock concludes.<sup>9</sup> Figure 1 shows a depiction of each generation from 1920 to 2000 and indicates the different age groups.

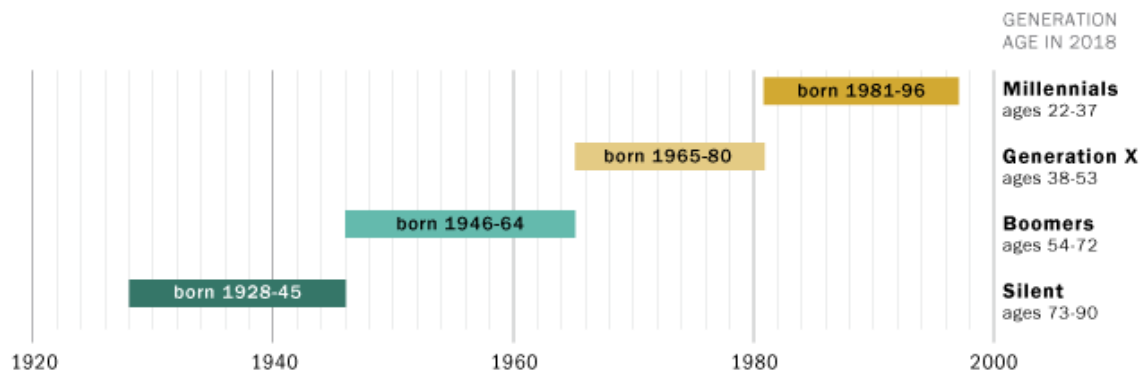


Figure 1. Pew Research Center Generational Breakdown<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Dimock.

<sup>9</sup> Dimock.

<sup>10</sup> Source: Pew Research Center, “Millennials,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed January 18, 2019, <http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/millennials/>.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines Jihad as “a holy war waged on behalf of Islam as a religious duty,” or “a personal struggle in devotion to Islam especially involving spiritual discipline.” It also offers a more banal definition, that of “a crusade for a principle or belief.”<sup>11</sup> However, the word crusade itself smacks of religious affiliation and harkens back to the 11th, 12th, and 13th century medieval expeditions sponsored by the European churches that aimed to recover the Holy Land from Muslim occupation. When discussing religion as a potential driver for violence in France in 2012–2016, this thesis takes a vertical approach from the Islamic texts and jurisprudence to modern terrorist networks like AQ and the Islamic State via neo-Salafists, such as Abu Musab al Suri, Osama Bin Laden, and Abu Musab al Zarqawi. These influential promoters of Islamic violence spread their extreme messages widely via pervasive online mediums and found a receptive and attentive audience among the “always on” millennial generation. Persuading these millennials to take up the jihad was easy in far too many of the case studies this thesis investigates. Consequently, the term “millennial jihadi,” for the purposes of this thesis, is an individual who fits within the millennial generation’s age parameters.<sup>12</sup> This individual is clearly influenced by the pervasive message of Islamic-inspired violence transmitted via the Internet, small cohorts, or French prisons, and makes the personal choice to employ violence in support of an extreme religious ideology.

### C. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The high volume of extreme Islamic-inspired attacks in France, French foreign fighters supporting violent Islamic terrorist efforts in the Levant, and the low level of assimilation to mainstream French culture by today’s French Muslim youth have quickly become major concerns for security and stability in France. Attempting to limit and prevent terrorism via the intellectual rigor and insight required to achieve an understanding of the threat and possible solutions is obviously a worthwhile cause and humane endeavor. Additionally, terrorism is detrimental to economic development and national security, and challenges the effectiveness of

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<sup>11</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “jihad,” last updated February 1, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/jihad>.

<sup>12</sup> Age cutoffs are not an exact science, and individuals slightly outside of the generational parameters may have lived their “always on” lives in the shadows of terror, have experienced economic hardship, and could be more properly identified as millennials, as opposed to the preceding “X” or subsequent “Z” generations.

the affected nation-state's capability to protect its citizens. These considerations aside, it is concern for human lives and the terror provoked by these attacks that drive this research.

Also, with nationalism and anti-Islamic sentiment on the rise in France, it is important to understand the social structure and governing policies in France. These societal influences are purportedly causing the perceptions of marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination among ethnic minorities in Western Europe, yet it is not enough simply to understand the environment of this new wave of terror. Equally important is understanding the mentality common among the beleaguered Muslim youth in France and the group dynamics that facilitate the escalation of radical behavior. Rarely do these millennial jihadis act on their own accord; rather, cultural, ideological, and religious groups influence them. It is necessary and important to understand how these groups develop in French culture and what can be done to minimize their perceptions of discrimination and marginalization and promote their assimilation.

As the Islamic State's caliphate and power diminish daily, it is necessary to look into rehabilitation programs that will address these trained and capable foreign fighters. Will the newly funded programs make significant contributions to stability and security within France? Proper research regarding key individual, cultural, religious, and psychological indicators will reveal who is at risk of resorting to violence, and more importantly, why. France, now at the forefront of the global war on terrorism, is providing the rest of the developed world with a series of important lessons learned; it is absolutely critical that its experience with postmodern terrorism be thoroughly analyzed.

#### **D. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Several theoretical explanations attempt to account for the recent spate of terrorist violence in France. These explanations are based on individual, societal structure, and religious or ideological grounds. Expert Olivier Roy, who published *Jihad and Death*, after the November 2015 terror attacks in France most effectively supports the first explanation. Roy posits that the radicalization of these jihadis serves as a nihilistic alibi for the beleaguered French youth to

commit acts of violence. Roy contends that these Western radicals are captivated by the prospect of death, which serves as their definitive action and the ultimate goal of their radicalization.<sup>13</sup>

Roy draws a distinction between jihadism and Salafism while rejecting the idea that religion is the gateway to violence. He introduces the idea of the “Islamization of Radicalism.” He establishes that most modern jihadis are not deeply religious and are instead using religion as an excuse to pursue their own individual objectives; they are acting on their own interpretation of Islam, “which first of all revolves around an imaginary [vision] of heroism and modern-day violence.”<sup>14</sup> Roy argues that religion is not the main basis for recruiting fighters to the Islamic State. In fact, 70% of modern jihadists recruited to fight for the caliphate admit that they have only a general knowledge of the religion.<sup>15</sup> However, the system that these jihadis operate within is a religiously grounded organization, and Roy believes that Islam does have an effect toward radicalization. He says, “Salafism is the gateway to jihadism” and “jihadis are supposedly Salafis.”<sup>16</sup> This thesis investigates these possible connections of religion, ideology, and Salafism as possible catalysts of the modern terror in France.

Gilles Kepel, in contrast with Roy, believes that the recent increase in Islamic terrorism is the fault of governmental, societal, and economic repression. His book *Terror in France* paints a detailed picture of the mass unemployment, failing assimilation, discrimination, and segregation that are facilitating the radicalization of many French Muslim youths.<sup>17</sup> Kepel looks deeply into the colonial legacy of France and the effect that segregation has had on the Muslim population

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<sup>13</sup> Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Roy, 43. Jerrold Post’s findings support Roy’s hypothesis that French youth are committing acts of nihilistic violence as an individual affliction and not as tool to gain political or ideological attention “Individuals are drawn to the path of terrorism in order to commit acts of violence,” Post articulates, “and their special logic, which is grounded in their psychology and reflected in their rhetoric, becomes the justification for their violent acts.” Jerrold Post, “Terrorist Psycho-logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psychological Forces,” in *Origins of Terrorism. Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 25.

<sup>15</sup> Roy, 42.

<sup>16</sup> Roy, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, xii.

from North Africa. He holds that the riots of 2005 were ignited by the discrimination against this disadvantaged second-generation migrant population.<sup>18</sup>

Kepel also introduces elements of religion and French secular government as drivers toward radicalization. He argues that “the intensification of Salafist identity politics was imported from Saudi Arabia” and that hardline leaders “hoped to establish themselves among the disenfranchised young people of the *banlieues* as ‘organic intellectuals’ who had culturally ‘disavowed’ infidel society.”<sup>19</sup> Further establishing that religion has a role in the modern play of terrorism, Kepel shows how the 2004 law that banned the wearing of religious garments in public further agitated certain underrepresented minorities and gave them “sufficient” reason to punish the “repressive” French government on grounds of religious persecution and morality.<sup>20</sup>

Michael Neiberg’s article “No More Elsewhere: France Faces the New Wave of Terrorism” analyzes the arguments of both Kepel and Roy. Neiberg draws attention to a new generation of French Muslim youths diametrically opposed to the normal assimilation process that their fathers and grandfathers subscribed to and analyzes what effect that has on the security and stability of France. Neiberg contends that a lack of political involvement segregated the French Muslims into sub-categories of French society and led to “spontaneous acts of young French Muslims responding to mostly local issues of alienation, underrepresentation, and persistent unemployment.”<sup>21</sup> These estranged youths began to live in seclusion in their run-down suburbs, oppressed and without hope; it would not be long before they discovered Salafist Islam via the Internet and turned their hate into violence.<sup>22</sup>

Rik Coolsaet, a Belgian scholar, supports Roy’s “Islamization of radicalism” argument in his article “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave.” This study investigates a similar phenomenon, one of a beleaguered ethnic minority and its magnetism with the Islamic State. With reference to the Syrian civil war, Coolsaet argues “the outbreak of the civil war and the

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<sup>18</sup> Kepel, xi.

<sup>19</sup> Kepel, 143–44. In France, *banlieues* are considered working class suburbs of a large city.

<sup>20</sup> Kepel, 142–45.

<sup>21</sup> Neiberg, “No More Elsewhere,” 23.

<sup>22</sup> Neiberg, 24.



emergence of IS as the primary jihadi group merely offered a new and supplementary channel for deviant behavior.”<sup>23</sup> His article provides statistical data on Belgian foreign fighters who have since returned home. He establishes a clear correlation between returned foreign fighters, subsequent abnormal behavior, and an increased security threat in Belgium.<sup>24</sup> Coolsaet’s research is relevant because the situation in France features many a parallel, if not an identical template, to the threat developing in Belgium.

Coolsaet, agreeing entirely with Kepel, without directly indicting the Belgian government, advances the significance of social inequality, exclusion, and marginalization as drivers toward radicalization. He supports his argument with recent EUROPOL (European Union Agency for Law Enforcement) data that has all but removed religion as a pathway to radicalization.<sup>25</sup> In describing this “fourth wave” of terrorism, Coolsaet concludes that support to the Islamic State is not “rooted in a fundamentalist reading of the scriptures,” but rather, stems from a “small subculture at the margins of society and of Muslim communities with whom they do not feel connected either.”<sup>26</sup> Their personal motive of avoiding a dreary and cloistered existence in an unwelcoming and repressive society provides the ambition toward deviant behavior.<sup>27</sup>

Jean-Pierre Filiu has written extensively on the radicalization process germane to the French Muslims and their contributions as foreign fighters in support of the Islamic State efforts in the Levant. His article “The French Veterans of Globalized Jihad” explores the alarming numbers of French citizens who fight under the Islamic State flag and what the future implications of battle-tested ISIS veterans within France’s borders might entail.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Rik Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave, What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case,” Egmont paper 81, *Egmont, Royal Institute for International Relations*, March 2016, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Coolsaet, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Coolsaet, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Coolsaet, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Coolsaet, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, “Terrorism in Europe: The French Veterans of Globalized Jihad,” in *IEMed. Mediterranean Yearbook 2016* (Barcelona: IEMed, 2016), 42.

Additionally, James Brandon, in his article “The Threat from British Jihadists after the Caliphate’s Fall,” predicts a grim future for the returning foreign fighters of the United Kingdom (UK). This possibility of an increased threat, one perpetrated against the government and public by trained and experienced militants, is as much a concern in France as in the United Kingdom. Brandon posits some creative government policies, institutions, and rehabilitation programs that may be of value in preventing ISIS-inspired violence, hardline Salafism, and pro-jihadi recruitment within these isolated communities.<sup>29</sup>

Delving into the profile and identity of these “millennial jihadis” and the underlying foundational characteristics that explain the cultural, structural, and pathological diagnosis of the recent global jihadi phenomenon, Marc Sageman, in his book titled *Understanding Terror Networks*, refutes the common misconception that terrorists are psychopaths. His research findings indicate only a small correlation of psychological disorder to future acts of violence; he establishes that mental pathology is not relevant to understanding jihadi movements.<sup>30</sup> Discrimination, marginalization, and wealth inequality, he posits, are more important than age, religion, education, and pathology in determining who is at risk for radicalization.<sup>31</sup> His research establishes clearly the misconceptions surrounding the profile of a millennial jihadi and provides empirical evidence that disproves traditional thinking.

David Tucker, in his article “Terrorism, Networks, and Strategy: Why the Conventional Wisdom is Wrong,” takes Sageman’s individual pathology a step further into analyzing the psychology of group dynamics. Tucker’s research establishes that radicalization is a process that occurs most often through small groups of friends or relatives who feel marginalized by their host nation or sympathetic towards those enduring the struggle. Once these groups of like-minded individuals socialize in a sympathetic environment, they begin to agitate each other—through internal competition—to make the step from ideological beliefs and resentment toward activism and violence. As they begin to motivate each other toward the extreme ends of the

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<sup>29</sup> James Brandon, “The Threat from British Jihadists after the Caliphate’s Fall,” *Terrorism Monitor* 16, no. 7 (April 6, 2018): 4–5.

<sup>30</sup> Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 91.

<sup>31</sup> Sageman, 95.

group's radical beliefs, these individuals, provided the right connection into jihadi networks, are likely to turn this anger into violence.<sup>32</sup>

Sarah Lyons-Padilla and her co-authors, in their work titled "Belonging Nowhere: Marginalization & Radicalization Risk among Muslim Immigrants," surveyed nearly 200 Muslim immigrants in an effort to understand what factors serve to increase radicalization among this high-risk population. Their "loss of significance" theory indicts marginalization and maltreatment by the host society and the accompanying "cultural homelessness" as a magnet toward support for deviant and extremist behavior.<sup>33</sup> They encourage host governments to factor societal pressures and structures into security policies. The authors also encourage these struggling governments to develop inventive ways to help this beleaguered community regain its sense of significance.<sup>34</sup>

Mark Juergensmeyer, in both his book titled *Terror in the Mind of God* and his article "Does Religion Cause Terrorism?," when addressing the various perceived grievances that have led to violence throughout history, found that "religion is not the initial problem; but the fact that religion is the medium through which these issues are expressed is *problematic*."<sup>35</sup> Although religious conviction can be the fundamental milestone in the sequence that leads to acts of terrorism, Juergensmeyer postulates that it is rarely the initial stimulus. He summarizes nearly all the contemporaneous terrorist attacks of the 21st century, the Paris attacks of 2015, and the *Charlie Hebdo* attack among them, as sharing "two striking characteristics. First, they have been violent—even vicious—in a manner calculated to be terrifying. And, secondly, they have been linked in some way to religion."<sup>36</sup> Juergensmeyer concludes quite definitively, "religion is

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<sup>32</sup> David Tucker, "Terrorism, Networks, and Strategy: Why the Conventional Wisdom Is Wrong," *Homeland Security Affairs* IV, no. 2 (June 2008): 7–8.

<sup>33</sup> Sarah Lyons-Padilla et al., "Belonging Nowhere: Marginalization & Radicalization Risk among Muslim Immigrants," *Behavioral Science & Policy* 1, no. 2 (2015): 3.

<sup>34</sup> Lyons-Padilla et al., 10.

<sup>35</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, "Does Religion Cause Terrorism?" *National Policy Forum on Terrorism, Security and America's Purpose*, September 2005, 7; italics in the original.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 4th ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 3.

crucial for these acts, since it gives moral justifications for killing and provides images of cosmic war that allow activists to believe that they are waging spiritual scenarios.”<sup>37</sup>

## **E. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

The massive terrorist attack perpetrated against the public transportation systems in London in 2005 was not anticipated in France. France did after all make a conscious decision not to support the U.S.-led effort against Saddam Hussein in the 2003 war in Iraq, unlike Great Britain.<sup>38</sup> The French were also proud of their inclusive society and openly welcomed immigrants of all ethnicities and religions. Their concept of *laïc* assimilation “projects the idea that France forms one solitary unit that does not recognize religious differences for social or political purposes.”<sup>39</sup> What then provoked the violence perpetrated in France?

This thesis analyzes several factors that could have contributed to the uptick in violence in France. While religious radicalization, a rise of nationalism in France, and other socio-economic factors might serve as enablers for violent Islamic-inspired terrorism in France, this research also investigated the potential influences of French secular immigration policies and the failing assimilation of today’s French Muslim youth. These influences have created a subset of second-generation Muslims who suffer from a perceived loss of significance and feel threatened by their own government’s actions and policies. This thesis found that these segregated youths, when driven away from mainstream society and culture, formed into cliques; and the psychology of small group dynamics and the propensity of its members to absorb the most radical ideologies of that group pushed its members, competing among each other, toward violence. The dynamics of these small group social interactions, which provided relevance and restored a sense of significance, identity, and meaning to the members, also provided a religious identity and crisis narrative that served as the final catalyst behind the recent rash of religiously inspired terrorism in France. Instead of one individual, socio-economic, religious, or structural catalyst, the causes

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<sup>37</sup> Juergensmeyer, xiv.

<sup>38</sup> Neiberg, “No More Elsewhere,” 21.

<sup>39</sup> Neiberg, 21.

of this violence in France can be better understood as a sequence and a combination of factors rather than one singular decisive element that drives the millennial jihadis toward violence.

## **F. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This thesis is designed to accomplish three objectives: (1) to investigate the most significant terrorist attacks conducted in France in the 21st century and provide a summary analysis of the perpetrators responsible for the most destructive events in 2012–2016, (2) to identify the relevant structural flashpoints and pathologies that may be driving this new population of terrorists labeled “millennial jihadis,” and (3) to establish that the recent jihadi terrorist attacks in France have qualities different from the politico-religious anti-colonial terror of the past and to assess the significance of any continuities and changes this spate of terror represents. A deeper understanding of these contextual variables may lead to more effective recommendations or improvements in deradicalization and reintegration programs, as well as social interactions, governmental policies, or rehabilitation programs that may lead to a more inclusive and less violent French society and culture.

Similar incidents of terrorism have occurred in Spain, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, each with several parallels that can be connected to their expanding ethnic immigrant population, a growing minority in each of these countries. Although events in these neighboring countries are cited occasionally to reinforce a similar idea germane to the French situation, this thesis is a single country case study focusing on the terrorist attacks, the perpetrators, and the causes of religious inspired terrorism in 2012–2016. France is a recent and repeated victim of large-scale terror perpetrated by this new generation of millennial jihadis. Consequently, it serves as an exemplary case study featuring several large-scale attacks and numerous perpetrators. These attacks have been well investigated and thoroughly documented, which makes it possible to draw conclusions from them. Additionally, the French government takes great pride in its nondiscriminatory secular administration and the nation’s inclusive and welcoming culture. France was firmly against the U.S.-led coalition that invaded Iraq in 2003, a position that (some observers have argued) should have placated the Muslim minority and furthered peace in France. Yet, even with all these aforementioned preventative circumstances, France continues to be afflicted by jihadi violence. Why is that the case? How can the French stop the terror?

Chapter II is structured to provide background leading up to the violence in France in 2012–2016. It offers an account of the large-scale terror attacks during that timeframe. Most importantly, it investigates who is responsible for the violence, whom they identified with and delivered their violence on behalf of, and who claimed credit for these destructive attacks. Chapter II concludes with an investigation of the backgrounds of the individual perpetrators, their paths to radicalization, and the circumstances surrounding their deaths. Utilizing the works of respected and prominent French authors published in 2017–2018, all with relevant books covering the French experience with terrorism in 2012–2016 and beyond, this thesis characterizes the ethnic origins, education levels, employment status, social acceptance, criminal records, gang or terror cell affiliations, religious convictions, radicalization, utilization, and details of their deaths to paint a “portrait” of a “millennial jihadi.”

Chapter III analyzes several established explanations for terrorism and compares the theories of many prominent terrorism scholars against the backgrounds, socio-economic status, and violent actions of France’s millennial jihadis. Chapter III presents a sequential theory of radicalization evident in nearly all significant cases of terrorism in France in 2012–2016. This thesis postulates the triggers that drive millennials toward religion and radical violence as a sequence of terror-promoting factors. These factors include opposition to the government’s or society’s perceived or real injustices and cause young men to forge their individual identity with groups that proselytize Salafi-jihadism. Then, via criminal or terror groups, prison gangs, or increasingly via the Internet, these individuals are radicalized via group dynamics. Finally, inspired by the religious narrative of “cosmic war,” they decide to commit acts of violence attributed to the group’s identity or ideological beliefs.

Chapter IV takes the “portrait” painted in Chapter II and the drivers toward religious-inspired terrorism uncovered in Chapter III and compares them to the perpetrators and circumstances surrounding France’s first wave of Salafi-Jihadism in the 1990s. In an effort to understand the continuities and differences between these two spates of terrorism, this thesis focuses on the manpower that took part in the violence, the message that inspired the fighters, and the medium through which that message was effectively delivered. By rearranging counterterrorism efforts and focusing on the manpower, the medium, and the message, Chapter

IV presents some theoretical approaches that may enable governments to minimize the extent of recruitment, the pervasiveness of the message, and ultimately, the level of violence compared to that experienced in France in 2012–2016.

## **G. THESIS OVERVIEW**

To understand the size and scope of the terrorist attacks in France holistically, this thesis first analyzes their recent history, the background and characteristics of the perpetrators of these assaults, and any underlying societal currents that may more clearly explain the origins of contemporary jihadi terrorism in France. Through an investigation of the behavior, religion, and ideology of the known terrorists, the French ethnic youth culture, the current governmental security institutions and policies, the pathology of these terrorists, and possible links that may have provoked the violent attacks in 2012–2016, this thesis attempts to identify the true causes of these terror attacks that victimized France. Only after a detailed examination of these major investigative themes can it be possible to begin to understand the complexities of this challenge and start to provide the awareness necessary to formulate potentially effective preventative measures.

Taking into account the main schools of thought (individual, societal structure, and religion) pertinent to understanding terrorism, this thesis emphasizes the group dynamics theory and examines how small bands of fanatics can easily radicalize their members and ultimately justify a high level of violence in support of their ideological cause. Although lone wolves have existed in the past, increasingly fewer solo actors have been self-radicalized without the influence of social media, Internet blogs, chatrooms, Facebook, and other on-line mediums. The most frequent recurring baseline in modern jihadi terrorism is that of group dynamics. While much has been published on terrorism, less attention has been devoted to suggestions as to how an appropriately structured society, one that promotes inclusion and not assimilation, one that addresses the current societal dynamics through policy, law, and programs, can serve to deradicalize violent youths, or to how society, education, and government can work together to gain the trust of these isolated and potentially violent millennials. As the Islamic State continues to experience setbacks and military defeats, highly experienced jihadis are likely to return to their home countries, and these questions must be addressed urgently.

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## II. THE PORTRAIT OF A MILLENNIAL JIHADI

But in this present moment of late modernity these secular concerns have been expressed through rebellious religious ideologies. The grievances—the sense of alienation, marginalization, and social frustration—are often articulated in religious terms and seen through religious images, and the protest against them is organized by religious leaders through the medium or religious institutions.<sup>40</sup>

—Mark Juergensmeyer

On 7 January 2015, three citizens from the fringes of French society executed a massive retaliatory attack against the satire magazine *Charlie Hebdo*; what began as a joke about fundamentalist Islam ended in a horrific three-day long nightmare that appalled the nation and alarmed the world. When the chaos was finally contained, three friends from the destitute surroundings of the 19th *arrondissement* (district) of northeastern Paris had killed 17 innocent citizens, and in the end, each of the terrorists fought to his death against local law enforcement.<sup>41</sup> Later that same year, just 10 months removed from this massacre, a faction of terrorists affiliated with ISIS perpetrated violence on a scale not witnessed in the Republic of France since the Nazi occupation of World War II. The heinous acts of terror started at the Stade de France and ended at the Bataclan Concert Hall in Paris. When the nefarious plan concluded, 137 lay dead, with 368 wounded.<sup>42</sup> “Most of these killers,” as Gilles Kepel points out, “have been identified as people born and raised in France and Belgium—the descendants of Algerian or Moroccan immigrants.”<sup>43</sup> These homegrown terrorists represent a new demographic, that of a younger population of French citizens conducting Islamic-inspired violence against the government and the people.

Another devastating attack occurred in Nice on 14 July 2016. A radicalized “lone wolf” conducted his cowardly attack during the Bastille Day parade and unleashed a new tactic of indiscriminate terror. He used a massive delivery truck to plow down innocent pedestrians; the

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<sup>40</sup> Juergensmeyer, “Does Religion Cause Terrorism?,” 7.

<sup>41</sup> Chrisafis, “Charlie Hebdo Attackers,” 2–3.

<sup>42</sup> Neiberg, “No More Elsewhere.”

<sup>43</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, XIV.

bloodbath stretched for over two kilometers on the crowded Promenade des Anglais. When this horrific act finally concluded, the death toll was in excess of 80, with some 400 more wounded. Again, the perpetrator fought to his death, and France was traumatized by the haphazard and horrific violence.<sup>44</sup> Although this technique used to inflict mass carnage was a new development, all these cases of terrorism have something significant in common: the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians masterminded by Frenchmen. All these recent incidents since the Toulouse and Montauban terror attacks of 2012 are remarkably different from the first wave of Islamic-inspired terror in the 1990s and appear not to be motivated exclusively by revenge, religion, or political interests.

This chapter comprises three sections and takes on the challenge of answering two very difficult questions: what are the characteristics of this recent spate of terrorism in France, and who are the perpetrators responsible for the modern carnage? In the first section, this research characterizes the GIA and the first installment of Islamic-inspired terrorism that plagued post-colonial France throughout the mid-1990s. The next section presents the background cases and the biographies of the perpetrators of this new demographic of terrorism, that of the “millennial jihadi.” In the last section, the research highlights the common characteristics of these modern terrorists and attempts to paint a detailed portrait of the “millennial jihadi” who continue to terrorize France in the 21st century. Additionally, by comparing these portraits (modern Islamic terror vs. post-colonial GIA terrorism), this research begins the evidentiary process necessary to conclude that France is indeed facing a distinctive demographic of terrorism in the 21st century; one committed by a newly constructed and decentralized global framework of Salafi jihadism. Governing bodies, policy makers, and counter-terrorism professionals that acknowledge the differences between GIA operatives and these millennial jihadis can develop innovative ideas, modify historically successful methods, and cultivate effective tactics and techniques to address accurately the modern and substantially different causes of Islamic-inspired terrorism.

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<sup>44</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, “After Nice: The Threat within Europe,” *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, no. 183 (July 19, 2016): 1.

## A. GIA: FRANCE'S FIRST INSTALLMENT OF JIHAD

France has endured a long relationship with many forms of terrorism; at home and abroad, the French have fought and defended revolutions, opposed Nazi occupation, prosecuted counterinsurgency operations, and safeguarded their citizenry from extreme ideologies that have routinely resorted to violence. To understand the present threat, this research reviews the past for similar characteristics, as well as contrasts. According to Millington, “while terrorism, as is evident from the French experience, is constantly evolving, looking to its past may offer lessons in how terrorist groups emerge, operate, evolve, and eventually recede.”<sup>45</sup> As France remains at the epicenter of global jihadi terrorism, it is important to analyze the present threat and attempt to determine what it is, as well as what it is not.

In the mid-1990s, the GIA violence spilled over from a civil-war-torn Algeria, and consequently, France implemented its first counterterrorism campaign against a religiously inspired terrorist group. Prior to this episode of Islamic-inspired terrorism, the violence experienced was always politically motivated and calculated for maximum movement toward the achievement of the group's objectives. The growth of the GIA was a direct response to the 1992 military takeover, a coup initiated by secular officers to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from gaining a political victory in Algeria. The initial aim of the GIA, its founding purpose, was to topple the apostate regime, remove any Western influence in Algerian politics, and establish an Islamic state governed by strict Sharia laws.<sup>46</sup> The GIA accused the Muslim population and the government in Algeria of *jahiliyya*, returning to a pre-Islamic state and turning their backs completely on the faith. To remedy this deterioration of religion, “the GIA considered it the right and indeed the duty of Muslims,” writes Shapiro, “to refuse Western laws and to be prepared to make war against the West at any moment.”<sup>47</sup> With a history of despotic colonial rule, centuries of wealth and resource extraction, and overt support for the military takeover and for steering Algeria away from Islam, France immediately became the most prominent target for this Islamist

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<sup>45</sup> Chris Millington, “Terrorism in France: Terrorist Violence Has a Long History in France,” *History Today*, no. 1 (January 8, 2015): 11.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Nesser, *Islamist Terror in Europe: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 70.

<sup>47</sup> Jeremy Shapiro, “French Responses to Terrorism from the Algerian War to the Present,” in *The Consequences of Counterterrorism*, ed. Martha Crenshaw (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010), 271.

violence. It did not take long for the GIA to transport its hatred across the Mediterranean Sea and punish France for its actions and policies in Algeria.

The first such attempt came on Christmas Eve in 1994. GIA operatives took control of Air France Flight 8969 bound for Paris. After a series of negotiations, the plane was allowed to take off from the Algiers International Airport bound for France. Due to some keen discussion, the terrorists, convinced that the plane did not have sufficient fuel to make it to Paris, its original destination, diverted and landed the plane in Marseilles. Upon landing, French commandos stormed the plane and neutralized the threat. The loss of life was minimal (three passengers were killed) in comparison with the devastation that might have been caused by an airliner crashing into a densely populated city, such as Paris.

The next wave of GIA attacks would be more significant and deadlier. In the summer of 1995, the GIA, under the leadership of local cell leader Khaled Kelkal, carried out a series of bombings that ultimately led to the GIA's dismantling and Kelkal's demise. The deadliest were the timed bombs that detonated in Paris in July 1995 that killed eight and injured more than 80.<sup>48</sup> These summer 1995 attacks led to a massive European-wide investigation and forced nearly all the members of GIA in Europe underground. The final step toward completely dismantling the threat came in September of that year when Kelkal was killed in a shootout that also injured his lead accomplice and resulted in his capture as well. This effective counterterrorism effort ushered in almost two decades of relatively peaceful times, with France free of Islamic inspired-violence.

Several of the characteristics of terrorism in France changed in the late 20th century, owing to the initiation of religiously inspired violence on French soil by the GIA. Cell members, although often captured and sometimes killed in the commission of their terror plots, did not plan to commit suicide or seek martyrdom themselves; they had a plan to survive their operations and most had a plan to escape or continue fighting if incarcerated. "Apart from the Air France hijacking," Nesser observes, "none of the attacks were suicide missions."<sup>49</sup> Proof of this belief is

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<sup>48</sup> Nesser, *Islamist Terror in Europe*, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Nesser, 76.

evident in the guerrilla warfare tactics employed by the GIA operatives within France. They favored bombs that either were on a timer or mechanically detonated, so that those who built, transported, and planted those explosives were nowhere to be seen upon detonation.<sup>50</sup> These operatives utilized counter-surveillance techniques, and established “safehouses” for planning, training, and hiding after their attacks.<sup>51</sup> Violence was their tool for achieving the politico-religious end state and not the end itself.

Additionally, the GIA was a purely hierarchical organization, which enabled the French counterterrorism efforts to target the central leadership quickly and rapidly dismantle them. Similar in its organization to AQ, the nucleus of the group controlled local branches, as well as advisory and executive bodies; these key leaders drew on the financial support of international donors. Furthermore, just like AQ, the GIA was first and foremost a regional jihadi effort to punish apostate regimes and remove non-believing invaders from Muslim lands. Like AQ, the demise of the GIA resulted from its overextension of violence.<sup>52</sup> This regional conflict, involving mainly Algeria and France, brought about by political obstruction, religious radicalization, and elevated by civil war, was significantly different from the global Salafi jihadism movement that has viciously targeted much of the West, including France, Great Britain, Spain, and the United States.

The GIA’s organizational motivations were clear and its operations were meant to further the achievement of the organization’s higher purpose and politico-religious end state, that of installing the caliphate in Algeria. The targets for GIA violence were a means to an end and not simply a desperate final act of violence. Nesser concludes, “the first jihadi attacks in Europe were ordered from Algeria to further GIA’s objectives at home.”<sup>53</sup> The Islamist violence in the 1990s was regionally focused, calculated, hierarchically initiated, and designed to achieve both religious and political institutional goals. Unfortunately, for France, the mutation to nihilistic, indiscriminate, and catastrophic violence would come after almost two decades of relative peace.

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<sup>50</sup> Nesser, 75.

<sup>51</sup> Nesser, 76.

<sup>52</sup> Nesser, 71.

<sup>53</sup> Nesser, 83.

Although both spates of violence seem to seize upon religion as a driver or an alibi, the differences between the GIA's terrorist methods and motivations, as compared to today's millennial jihadi, are noticeable, significant, and compelling.

## **B. FRANCE'S SECOND WAVE—THE RETURN OF TERROR**

This new demographic of terror revealed itself in France, albeit on a much smaller scale than the 2015–2016 attacks, in March 2012. Mohammed Merah, a French citizen with ethnic ties to Northern Africa, went on a killing spree in a remote area of southern France. Merah intentionally targeted French soldiers in Toulouse and later a Jewish schoolhouse in Montauban. In three separate attacks over the course of eight terrifying days, Merah murdered three French paratroopers (all of African descent), a Jewish rabbi, and three elementary schoolchildren.<sup>54</sup> This horrific sequence of attacks would foreshadow a much more sinister and barbaric level of violence that was looming in the not too distant future.

The absence of an apparent political or ideological cause (other than jihadism) and a missing identity in French society and culture would become the recurring denominators for almost all the perpetrators of the significant terrorist attacks that would soon follow. Additionally, Merah recently radicalized after serving out a prison sentence for petty crime and subsequently viewing propaganda for radical Islamic ideology on the Internet. He embraced the extreme religious ideology even prior to recruitment and apprenticeship training with the Taliban in Afghanistan. As is evident in nearly all the cases this thesis examines, Mohammed Merah was raised fatherless in a low-income and impoverished neighborhood on the outskirts of mainstream society. He was exposed to discrimination and segregation and struggled to find work, relevance, and equality.<sup>55</sup>

Another important distinction to make, one that was not evident in the previous instances of Islamic-inspired terrorism in France, is the fact that Mohammed Merah apparently had no intention of surviving. He continued his acts of terrorism, with no apparent plan for escape, and was killed by responding law enforcement officers. “This systematic choice of death,” Roy

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<sup>54</sup> Neiberg, “No More Elsewhere,” 24.

<sup>55</sup> Neiberg, 24.

claims, is a new phenomenon, and prior to this recent wave of Salafi jihadism, “the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in France...whether or not they had any connection with the Middle East, carefully planned their escape.”<sup>56</sup> This disturbing ideology of nihilism sensationalized by jihadist propaganda, which is unique to this new demographic of terror, promotes the pursuit of death and justifies that pursuit in a perceived state of war. In the West, Roy writes, jihadism “is a youth movement that not only is constructed independently of the parents’ religious and cultural references but is also inseparable from our societies’ ‘youth culture.’”<sup>57</sup>

The intelligence community identified Merah as a member of the Buttes-Chaumont terror cell, so called because this network of terrorist apprentices would use the park in Paris’s 19th arrondissement to socialize, share radical ideas of jihadism, and prepare themselves physically for the future rigors of combat. Although counter-terrorism officials discovered this network prior to the uptick in jihadi violence in 2012, the subsequent jihadi violence in France can be attributed to this homegrown network.<sup>58</sup> The culprits in the *Charlie Hebdo*, Paris 2015, and Nice 2016 attacks can all be traced back to this Islamist network in some form or another. This new generation of millennial jihadis, Kepel writes, “shared the experiences of the Iraqi battlefield and of prison, and it was beginning to construct heroized figures that would serve as models for various types of young sympathizers.”<sup>59</sup> Just before his death in December 2013, Abu Abdel Rahman, an ISIS spokesperson turned martyr and active member of these French jihadi terror cells, recorded an ISIS propaganda video applauding Merah and his “appropriate” example of offensive jihad.<sup>60</sup> The 2012 Toulouse attack committed by Mohammed Merah was likely a byproduct of this radical youth interaction in the Buttes-Chaumont park in the early 2000s. Clearly a riptide was swirling under the surface, and by the end of 2014, the Islamic State was gaining influence among this minority of young beleaguered and impressionable Frenchmen who were attracted by this level of nihilistic violence. The shockwaves of terror, fear, and jihadism would be felt significantly in 2015.

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<sup>56</sup> Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Roy, 2.

<sup>58</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, 29.

<sup>59</sup> Kepel, 90.

<sup>60</sup> Kepel, 108.

Two pioneers of the French jihadi movement affiliated with the Buttes-Chaumont terror cell, Said and Cherif Kouachi, intensified the level of violence in their January 2015 terrorist attack against *Charlie Hebdo*, a French satirical newspaper. Seeking revenge for an off-color cartoon that depicted the prophet Mohammed and ridiculed Muslim extremists, the Kouachi brothers murdered 12 and injured another 11. They summarily murdered many of the cartoonists and editors of *Charlie Hebdo* with Kalashnikovs. A Muslim police officer who confronted the fleeing terrorists was among the 12 killed that day.<sup>61</sup> The Kouachi brothers terrorized the streets of Paris as they attempted to induce shock, panic, and mass hysteria; they repeatedly and proudly announced that they had avenged the prophet with their barbaric actions. “The number and the positions of the victims executed in cold blood in the middle of Paris,” writes Kepel, “made the event a genuine cataclysm whose symbolic import was tantamount to a cultural September 11.”<sup>62</sup> The “hero” personas conceptualized a decade prior in the Paris park radicalization meetings and physical training sessions were starting to force their ideology, hatred, and terror on their “infidel” enemies.

In parallel, another attack would commence during this three-day reign of terror. Amedy Coulibaly, another member of the Buttes-Chaumont cell, would target the *Hyper Cacher*, a kosher supermarket in Paris’s eastern district of Porte de Vincennes. When his killing spree concluded, another four lay dead and nine additional were wounded. Police would kill all three of these millennial French jihadis during the culmination of their final acts of terror and hostage taking.<sup>63</sup> It would soon be discovered that these misfits of the Republic were all born, raised, and educated in France; they were inspired and radicalized by international terrorist networks through their local community, prison, social groups, and the Internet. The government of France quickly realized it was facing a serious national security threat. How could a homegrown terrorist, one who had previous criminal convictions and was listed on the U.S. terrorist watchlist, return to France unnoticed and commit this level of appalling violence against the citizens of the Republic?

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<sup>61</sup> Neiberg, “No More Elsewhere,” 25.

<sup>62</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, 152.

<sup>63</sup> Neiberg, “No More Elsewhere,” 25.



Amedy Coulibaly, who is thought to have been the overall director of the *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Cacher terrorist attacks, was the first of these millennial jihadis who did not travel abroad to receive training from a foreign terror network or serve as a foreign fighter for AQ or the Islamic State.<sup>64</sup> However, he certainly did not fly under the radar undetected either. Coulibaly served numerous sentences at the Muslim-dominated Fleury-Merogis prison where he was incubated in an extremist environment. Alongside Cherif Kouachi, a “card-carrying” member of the Buttes Chaumont terror network, Djamel Beghal nurtured Coulibaly in the ways of the Islamic jihad. Beghal was a Frenchman of northern African descent imprisoned after having trained with Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and attempting to return to France to conduct a terrorist attack against the Republic.<sup>65</sup>

Coulibaly’s background tells a story of a beleaguered youth growing up in a poor family of African descent, living in an impoverished neighborhood, poorly educated, and showing outward signs of hatred toward the government through civil disobedience and crime. He was marginalized by society, unemployed at the time of the attack, and had very little influence in his life from any positive male role model. His family was not excessive in their practice of religion, nor did Coulibaly display any strict adherence to the faith; he committed burglaries and sold drugs as early on as junior high school.<sup>66</sup> Immediately following the *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Cacher attacks, ISIS exalted Coulibaly with extensive praise and held him up as a shining example of what any faithful Muslim could and should do, that of waging jihad against the West and in the West.<sup>67</sup> Just as the Kouachi brothers would fight for martyrdom, Coulibaly would die from ballistic trauma suffered in a gun battle that terminated his reign of terror and hostage taking mayhem.

Said Kouachi followed a slightly different path to radicalization. He was the only one of the three who did not serve time in prison. However, the same group dynamics of radicalization are mirrored through his involvement with the Buttes Chaumont network and an affiliation with

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<sup>64</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, 161.

<sup>65</sup> Kepel, 157.

<sup>66</sup> Kepel, 159.

<sup>67</sup> Kepel, 162–63.

Salim Benghalem, one of France's most notorious ISIS foreign fighters.<sup>68</sup> Before joining the Islamic State's efforts in Syria and climbing the ISIS ranks higher than any other Frenchman, Benghalem fundamentally shaped the radicalized paths of Merah, the Kouachi brothers, and Coulibaly.<sup>69</sup> The Kouachi brothers, also born in France but of Algerian descent, were economically deprived and fatherless. Said was unemployed, despite the fact that he studied and obtained a training certificate for vocational purposes. The final step in Said's radicalization process would come by way of formal training sponsored by Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen. Sometime prior to 2014, Said would join his brother and Benghalem in the Middle East to receive formal instruction on planning and conducting terrorist operations.

Cherif Kouachi would follow a radicalization pathway similar to that of Merah and Coulibaly. Cherif was educated and earned a certificate as a physical education teacher, yet he would choose terror over teaching as an occupation. Cherif was suspected of terrorism and was detained in 2005 while boarding a flight to Damascus; it was assumed that he was headed to Iraq to fight for AQI. During this prison sentence, he would meet Coulibaly and Benghalem and formulate his plan to support the jihad. "It was in the prison incubator of Fleury-Merogis," Kepel writes, "that the threads were woven of the tragedy that was to take place a decade later."<sup>70</sup> After being released, with the influence and tutelage of the former AQI operative Benghalem, Cherif traveled immediately to Yemen and fought with AQAP. While waiting for his brother to join him, he would be further influenced by the ill-reputed Benghalem.<sup>71</sup>

In the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Cacher attacks, after all the millennial jihadis involved fought their way to death and martyrdom, the only factor of interest left was to claim ownership for the atrocities. Even though the Kouachi brothers were trained by and claimed allegiance to AQAP, Coulibaly claimed superiority over the Kouachi brothers by asserting that he supported their efforts financially. With this declaration, Zawahiri of the "old" terror organization, AQ, yielded ultimate credit for the horrendous attacks to next generation

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<sup>68</sup> Kepel, 158.

<sup>69</sup> Kepel, 101.

<sup>70</sup> Kepel, 157.

<sup>71</sup> Kepel, 156–59.

jihadis, and to the “caliph” Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed leader of ISIS.<sup>72</sup> This credit-assigning arrangement was symbolic of “passing the torch” from a centralized organizational approach of conducting international terror to this new generation of global millennial jihadis, who have been increasingly locally radicalized, recruited, trained, and utilized mainly through the Internet and social media platforms. During the expansion phase of Islamic State operations, this decentralized network approach, coupled with the aggressive conquest of territory in Iraq and Syria, would become the hallmark of the Islamic State’s two-pronged effort against Western “infidel” countries while simultaneously governing and retaining their expanding Caliphate in the Levant.<sup>73</sup>

The deadliest ISIS-inspired attack in French history came just 10 months after the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre. The operatives responsible for this horrific bloodbath, Cragin writes, “included seven individuals from France and Belgium, who had travelled previously to Syria to fight for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Two additional assailants, Iraqis, were sent by ISIS commanders to Europe for the attack.”<sup>74</sup> The devastating sequence of attacks at the Bataclan Concert Hall, the Stade de France, and the restaurant scene in the 11th arrondissement claimed the lives of 137 people and wounded another 368.<sup>75</sup> The shock and pandemonium were felt the world over. Just hours into the mayhem, President Hollande of France was forced to use military capabilities and institute a state of urgency and mandatory curfew.<sup>76</sup> He would soon call on the European Union (EU) for assistance by invocation of Article 42(7) of the Lisbon Treaty concerning the EU’s Common Security and Defense Policy, an action that was without precedent. The government quickly set to answering the urgent and puzzling questions: Who

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<sup>72</sup> Kepel, 164.

<sup>73</sup> As of December 2018, the U.S. Department of Defense estimates IS to have over 30,000 militants in Iraq and Syria together. Despite these alarmingly high estimates, the IS Caliphate has shrunk to less than 1% of the geographical area it occupied in 2015, when IS made its bold proclamation and seized control of large areas of sovereign territory in Iraq and Syria. “After the Caliphate: Has IS Been Defeated?,” BBC News, sec. Middle East, December 20, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45547595>.

<sup>74</sup> R. Kim Cragin, “The November 2015 Paris Attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Spring 2017, 212.

<sup>75</sup> Neiberg, “No More Elsewhere,” 25.

<sup>76</sup> Cragin, “The November 2015 Paris Attacks,” 224.

could perpetrate such indiscriminate violence against France? Why had this tragedy hit the Republic yet again?

Following in the footsteps of Mehdi Nemmouche, Mohamed Merah, and the Kouachi brothers, the core of this operational cell was made of up five Frenchmen, millennials who had recently gone through a religious “reconversion” and had been previously fighting in ISIS-occupied Syria for nearly two years prior to returning to Europe to conduct this massive terrorist operation. Once inside France, these operatives were successful in covertly recruiting 21 additional perpetrators who provided support for the operation. “Of these additional 21 recruits,” Cragin writes, “seven had previously fought in Syria or Iraq.”<sup>77</sup> With the exception of Amedy Coulibaly, every one of the French citizens involved in these significant terrorist attacks in 2012–2015 were forged by AQ and ISIS in the cauldron of battle in Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syria. The similarities between these Frenchmen turned foreign fighters and those who culminate their radicalization with acts of nihilistic terror, unfortunately, do not end there.

Bilal Hadfi, a French citizen from Morocco, was part of the cell that attempted to attack the soccer game between Germany and France at the Stade de France that fateful evening. The three suicide bombers were denied admittance into the stadium, apparently foiled by local stadium security procedures. Hadfi and the two Iraqi fighters all detonated their suicide vests outside the stadium and caused minor damages and no casualties.<sup>78</sup> Bilal, like the other millennial jihadis, fought to the death in the spirit of martyrdom but did not live his early life in pursuit of religious aims. Kepel wrote about Hadfi’s remarkably fast conversion to radical Islam. He noted that Hadfi was “a compulsive marijuana smoker whose Facebook wall shows him wearing a swimsuit and sipping a cocktail next to a pool as recently as 2014.”<sup>79</sup> This common trend of conversion after enjoying a secular life of nightclubs, bars, drinking, dancing, and drugs is seen in nearly all the French millennial jihadis identified in modern literature.

Another French citizen, who happened to be living in Belgium prior to conducting the attack, Ibrahim Abdeslam, participated in the gunning down of restaurant patrons in the 11th

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<sup>77</sup> Cragin, 219.

<sup>78</sup> Cragin, 223.

<sup>79</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, XIV.

arrondissement. With his “drive by” shooting rampage concluded, he proclaimed his final act of violence by detonating his suicide vest among the patrons of the Comptoir Voltaire café. The cell was responsible for murdering 39 people and mutilating dozens more.<sup>80</sup> Ibrahim, with his brother Salah, who was on France’s most wanted list for his support of the November 2015 terrorist attack in Paris, managed a bar in Belgium called Les Beguines. The Abdeslam brothers were reported to have dealt drugs out of that establishment.<sup>81</sup> They also partied at nightclubs in the days leading up to the terrorist attack.

Sami Amimour, aided by Omar Ismael Mostefai and Foued Mohammed Aggad, led the deadliest action of the night, one carried out by a cell of all French citizens. These gunmen stormed the Bataclan Concert Hall and killed at random; when the hostage siege was finally over, 89 people had been murdered and dozens more injured.<sup>82</sup> The ringleader of this operation, Amimour, was reported to have been “playing cat and mouse,” Kepel writes, “before shooting them [his victims] as impassively as people zap video game avatars.”<sup>83</sup> This coldhearted merciless violence has become the *modus operandi* for this new demographic of terrorists, as if these killers are seeking the final sinister and poisonous act of revenge. These nihilistic killers, Kepel concludes, “struck Parisians indiscriminately, without respect to the diversity of their origins. The random machine-gunning of sidewalk cafes and restaurants in Paris neighborhoods with large numbers of immigrants or descendants of immigrants and the carnage of the Bataclan both attest to this.”<sup>84</sup> This extreme violence seems to be retribution for their beleaguered and menial lives lived under economic deprivation and *de facto* segregation in the immigrant banlieues of France. This *modus operandi* would repeat itself in horrific fashion just months after the remaining perpetrators of the November 2015 Paris terror attack were finally brought to justice.

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<sup>80</sup> Cragin, “The November 2015 Paris Attacks,” 223.

<sup>81</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, XV.

<sup>82</sup> Cragin, “The November 2015 Paris Attacks,” 224.

<sup>83</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, XV.

<sup>84</sup> Kepel, XV.

Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel perpetrated the last catastrophic attack carried out on French soil by this millennial jihadi generation of terrorists. Bouhlel was of Tunisian descent but had been living in France legally since 2005; he too was radicalized just prior to conducting his final act of indiscriminate violence. Bouhlel, Roy writes, “cast his madness in the ISIS grand narrative, making contact with and joining the organization before going into action, where he may have found accomplices and received its blessing, only too pleased to see its prophecies fulfilled.”<sup>85</sup>

His madness was on full display when Bouhlel drove his cargo truck weighing in excess of 14,000 pounds into a crowded celebration of Bastille Day on July 14, 2016. The Promenade des Anglais in the city of Nice was transformed into a scene from a horror movie. When police were finally able to neutralize the threat, kill Bouhlel, and stop the butchery caused by the careening cargo truck, 86 people had been killed and another 434 injured. Victims were again indiscriminately targeted; the elderly, children, and Muslims were not spared in the malicious and extreme violence. Although Bouhlel was thought to have relatively low intelligence and an extremely volatile temper, Kepel attributes this excessive violence to the ISIS narrative and propaganda efforts, “where extreme violence and bestiality are communicated live over the Internet, and the world of the neglected immigrant banlieues that are seedbeds of the civil and religious wars that terrorist acts aim to provoke.”<sup>86</sup>

### **C. SKETCHING THE PORTRAIT OF TERROR**

With this new demographic of terror with a unique set of characteristics on full display, it is necessary to draw out the important distinctions, as well as the less frequently analyzed nuances visible in this portrait of the millennial jihadi. How is this postmodern spate of violence different from the Islamic-inspired terrorist acts committed during the late 20th century? How is it largely the same? This analysis has confirmed that these perpetrators of violence in France were largely homegrown, with most having no significant association with (or knowledge of) religion or sacred texts prior to their radicalization process. Just like their Islamist predecessors

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<sup>85</sup> Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 37.

<sup>86</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, XV.

of the 1990s, these terrorists are not suffering from pathological disorders or mental diseases. However, they are, for the most part, entirely disconnected from any set of political objectives that typified the ancestry of Islamist terror in France. These millennial jihadis are largely alienated from mainstream society, most with perceived grievances about the state's behavior toward them or toward the group in which they assumed an identity. All were exposed to further radicalization through group dynamics and socialization, via either the Buttes Chaumont terror network, similar radical affiliations, prison groups, mosques, or the Internet. However, numerous the similarities may be, the differences are as significant in number, and all have grim overtones that paint an even more sinister picture of the millennial jihadis.

Beginning with the operatives of the 9/11 epic terrorist attacks against the United States, these postmodern terrorists are capable of soliciting and planning international efforts and dispensing carnage on an unprecedented scale. France was the victim of two large-scale terror attacks in 2015, with its "9/11" conducted by the Islamic State in November of that year. The November 2015 attack was the deadliest in French history and claimed the lives of 129 people. Just eight months later, the extreme violence would escalate yet again, this time at the hands of Mohammed Bouhlel. After plowing over 520 pedestrians and singlehandedly killing 86 of them, he would earn the nefarious title of the "deadliest terrorist" in French history. Additionally, the desire for martyrdom through suicide operations or via fanatical resistance without any intent or plans to escape is a trending phenomenon rarely seen prior to this 21st century global jihadi craze. Without exception, all the operatives of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, the Paris Bataclan and Hyper Casher terror sequence, and the Nice attack either detonated a suicide vest during their assault or fought to the death during local law enforcement and military responses to the incident. Also, many more, such as the infamous Salim Benghalem mentioned previously, martyred themselves in support of the Islamic State's efforts in the Levant. This disconnected global jihadi effort, the proliferation of suicide tactics, and the heroization of the movement's martyrs were not present during the GIA's jihadi operations in France during the 1990s.

This barbaric utilization of indiscriminate violence, which has become all too common in this new spate of terror in France, is different as well. "There are no innocents," writes Roy, because in the eyes of the jihadis, "western peoples are responsible for their governments'

actions, and the Muslim who does not rebel is a traitor whom there is no reason to spare during the indiscriminate attacks.”<sup>87</sup> The victim profiles of the Bataclan Concert hall and the Promenade des Anglais are diverse and include the elderly, men, women, and children from numerous nationalities, ethnicities, and religious affiliations. These young jihadis are desensitized to death, violence, and killing. These young minds are warped into a perverse thrill-seeking state that becomes capable of torturing victims, committing suicide by detonating explosive vests, lopping off heads and posting videos on the Internet, or summarily killing innocent children. These young jihadis are indoctrinated through either on-site training in terrorist camps, active participation in AQ or ISIS battlefields, or constant exposure to gruesome videos, pictures, and talk of death and gore via the Internet

The radicalization process that has taken over this new demographic of jihadis is different from the terror witnessed by older generations in France. In describing the difference between the 1990s radicals, who departed primarily from Middle Eastern countries to fight in Afghanistan, and postmodern jihadis, Roy observes, “one major difference is that many jihadis are recruited over the Internet or, more precisely, look on the Internet to find fellow volunteers or information on the jihad.”<sup>88</sup> The Internet and the interconnected nature of the world today are serving in lieu of the typical group radicalization process seen in the Buttes Chaumont terror cell, French prisons, and radical mosques; this mechanism of radicalization allows postmodern terror groups to draw from an assemblage of volunteers who they did little to create. This complication forces governments under attack to focus on the narrative of radicalization and provides minimal rewards for the physical destruction of the active terrorist network alone. The ideology and process of radicalization must be addressed within the social construct of their sovereign borders to understand fully the complexity of the threat that they face in the 21st century.

Several characteristics and commonalities surfaced during the research for this chapter that deserve further interpretation and attribution. Nearly all these French millennial jihadis lacked father figures during their formative years, a divergence from past generations whose fathers were present and invested. With reference to the first generation of northern African

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<sup>87</sup> Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 48.

<sup>88</sup> Roy, 17.



immigrants, Kepel writes, they “could not accept seeing decades of hard work and saving destroyed by the acts of a few young fanatics.”<sup>89</sup> Additionally, a potential crime-terror nexus merits further investigation. Approximately 85% of the new generation of jihadis detailed in Kepel’s study have rather extensive criminal backgrounds and have served out prison terms; a better understanding of those prison communities, the pervasive ideologies within them, and the backgrounds of the inmates is necessary to draw any relevant conclusions about links between criminal activity, prison sentences, and acts of terror.

Lastly, self-promotion and self-defined heroism are common among the French millennial jihadis. “But what is striking is the extraordinary narcissistic posturing of the terrorists,” Roy writes, “as well as their ‘derealized’ relationship to death. They broadcast themselves in self-produced videos before, during, and after their actions (posthumous videos).”<sup>90</sup> In the same vein, these postmodern jihadis are “heroizing” their personas, obsessing over violence, and hyping themselves up with a utopian narrative of glorious battle until death, which, Sageman writes, “becomes the ultimate standard for heroism.”<sup>91</sup> This self-promoted heroism via video and the Internet is a radical departure from GIA information operations, propaganda, and recruiting during its wave of Islamist terror in France during the 1990s. These concepts are addressed in Chapter IV. The social implications and consequences of these concepts are explored with the aim of understanding the most significant (and maybe overlooked) causes responsible for this recent uptick in violence in France.

Terrorism in France has become an enterprise of “homegrown” violence perpetrated by a new collection of its own citizenry: those who, for a myriad of plausible reasons, become radicalized and inspired to undertake horrific acts of terrorism within their home country and against their fellow citizens. Many of these homegrown Islamic militants are radicalized through Islamic State propaganda viewed on the Internet, or within the prison systems, or by frequenting the local mosques with a Salafist influence. Many of these jihadis are then recruited and gain experience in foreign training camps or modern battlefields like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and

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<sup>89</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, 28.

<sup>90</sup> Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 49.

<sup>91</sup> Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 160.

Yemen. After this spate of jihadi terrorism and especially after the significant terrorist attacks of 2015 and 2016, those returning foreign fighters have been recognized as a significant threat to the Republic. This new demographic of Islamic-inspired terror, as opposed to the GIA, encompasses a highly decentralized network of generally uneducated violent criminals who loosely champion extreme Salafi-jihadi ideology. The perpetrators of this new terror, these millennial jihadis, typically fight to the death by engaging in suicide tactics, or, through siege and hostage taking, resist until responding authorities are forced to neutralize them. This demographic has become a recurring and definitive attribute of these modern French jihadis.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

After a comprehensive investigation into these horrific acts of terror and a wide-ranging look at the characteristics of those responsible for perpetrating the violence in France, it is compellingly clear that France is indeed facing a new wave of terror from a demographic different from that prominent prior to the turn of the century. This second installment of Islamic-inspired terror brings with it the characteristics of the postmodern transnational jihadi movement. This second spate of Islamist terrorism features a distinctive and pervasive radicalization process, a captivating message that is easily spread in the interconnectedness of modern society, and a new demographic that is receptive to unprecedented levels of violence. Unless these millennial jihadis are addressed in the new light of postmodern terrorism analysis, they will continue to be a significant and pervasive force for evil. Roy, in his book, *Jihad and Death*, concludes, “Today we do not wish to see the radical’s face, know his name, or hear his voice. We want him to remain in the realm of the unknown.”<sup>92</sup> Yet, the voice of the millennial jihadi *must* be heard and his portrait closely examined so that governments and societies the world over can better understand the many causes of radicalization, its potential devastation, and the ugliness of its face.

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<sup>92</sup> Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 99.

### III. CAUSES OF JIHAD

I keep informed about the political, economic, and social situation in France the better to prepare the counter-attack. The French state must know that the war will not always take place in Muslim countries. Thus, one day you have to expect that it will be the Islamic army that enters France. And you will have deserved it.<sup>93</sup>

—Maxime Hauchard  
January 2015

Maxime Hauchard was born and raised in the suburbs of Rouen, the capital city of the Normandy province in France. His family was deeply integrated into the trellis of society; Maxime's mother was a social worker and his father a maintenance worker. He was of white ethnicity, raised as a Catholic, and thought of highly by all who knew him. Yet, by the age of 22, Maxime had quickly self-radicalized, became committed to fighting in the global jihad with the Islamic State, and was indicted, by undisputable photographic and video evidence, in the beheadings of an American aid worker, Peter Kassig, and several imprisoned Syrian pilots.<sup>94</sup> What could possibly drive a white, educated, assimilated, and seemingly benevolent French citizen from the suburbs of Rouen to convert, coarsen his extreme religious views, and mobilize in support of an Islamic Caliphate? Similar questions have been asked about Mohamed Merah, the Kouachi brothers, Amedy Coulibaly, the French operatives in the 2015 Paris attacks, and Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel; all of whom were responsible for catastrophic violence against France and its citizens in 2012–2016.

#### A. THE SEQUENCE OF TERROR

This chapter analyzes several of the established explanations for terrorism in recent history and compares the writings of many prominent experts concerning the French terrorism milieu. Although much of the literature can help to deepen understanding of terrorism in France in 2012–2016, no single explanation can fully account for the complexities of individual,

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<sup>93</sup> Hauchard quoted in Kepel, *Terror in France*, 134.

<sup>94</sup> Anne Penketh, "French Neighbors Puzzle over Maxime Hauchard, Accused in Beheadings," *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-french-jihadist-20141129-story.html>.

societal, religious, and group variables that influenced the perpetrators of violence mentioned previously. However, throughout the conduct of this research, a noticeable pattern has developed. This thesis has discovered a sequence of enablers evident in nearly all significant cases of terrorism in France during this period. The accumulation of these variables drove these beleaguered youths, in opposition to the government's perceived or real economic or social injustices, to identify with groups promoting Salafi-Jihadism. Then, via established organizations (crime or terror networks, prison groups, and recently the Internet) these individuals radicalized through the dynamics of that crowd. Finally, the ISIS religious narrative inspired them and compelled them to commit acts of violence on behalf of the group.

### **Injustice → Self-Identification & Group Dynamics → Religious Alibi → Terrorism**

This recent spate of Islamist inspired violence in France can be compared to the GIA violence in the mid-1990s. In an effort to deter further French involvement in the Algerian contestation between the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood and the secular military regime, in December 1994, the GIA brought its regional conflict to the French homeland and prosecuted a terror campaign to punish the French government. In less than two years, after a sequence of moderately successful terrorist attacks, the GIA was responsible for eight deaths and a couple of hundred injuries.<sup>95</sup> The last successful attack was carried out in October 1995, an attack that wounded 34 people when a bomb exploded aboard a suburban train in Paris.<sup>96</sup> After a curtailed and rather insignificant bout of Islamic-inspired terrorism in France in 1994–1995, the rapid dismantling of the GIA ushered in nearly two decades of relative peace in France. What, then, after a significant period of peace and stability, is causing this recent spate of Islamic-inspired violence in France?

## **B. KEPEL VS. ROY ARGUMENT**

Two of the prominent French authors who have weighed in on this question are Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel. Roy holds that political causation for revenge (French colonial legacy in

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<sup>95</sup> Peter Nesser, "Chronology of Jihadism in Western Europe 1994–2007: Planned, Prepared, an Executed Terrorist Attacks," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 10 (2008): 924.

<sup>96</sup> Nesser, 928.

Northern Africa, reprisal for French military interventions in the Middle East, and social segregation of Muslim minorities in France) and violence initiated or justified through Salafism are insufficient to explain the current of terrorism flowing through the impoverished neighborhoods of France.<sup>97</sup> Roy maintains “that the systemic association with death is one of the keys to today’s radicalization: the nihilist dimension is central.”<sup>98</sup> He states pointedly, “violence is not a means. It is an end in itself. It is violence devoid of future.”<sup>99</sup> Roy almost entirely removes religion from the equation, yet he categorizes these perpetrators of violence as a subset of jihad; clearly, a concept rooted in and defined by Islam. He credits nihilism and a thirst for violence over religion, and sees the acceptance of martyrdom as responsible for the recent phenomenon of suicide tactics or fighting to the death with no plan for escape. Religion, as Roy sees it, is an alibi to conduct violence and carry out a fascination with death.<sup>100</sup>

Kepel, in contrast, investigates the complex web of societal influences that fractured the peaceful cohabitation of Muslim immigrants and the French majority. Through this fault line, Kepel posits, Salafism was introduced into these dispossessed communities, and social upheaval, anger toward the government, and violence seeped in. Kepel indicts France’s failing assimilation processes, post-colonial contestation, anti-Muslim political discourse, *laïcité* laws that targeted fundamental aspects of Islam, discrimination against Muslim minorities, and radical Islam as key factors in religious radicalization and violence.<sup>101</sup> Kepel declares that his assessment is “based on precise knowledge of the facts...founded, first of all, on several decades of fieldwork in France’s neglected neighborhoods. It is also founded on a reading of the ideologically charged primary source material in the original Arabic.”<sup>102</sup> The disproportion of wealth, lack of political representation, high youth unemployment rate, and segregation of these millennials of immigrant

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<sup>97</sup> Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 6–7.

<sup>98</sup> Roy, 5.

<sup>99</sup> Roy, 5.

<sup>100</sup> Roy, 18.

<sup>101</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, 2–3.

<sup>102</sup> Kepel, xi.

background, according to Kepel, are viewed as grievances and perceived injustices that drive these youths toward jihadi recruiters and violence.<sup>103</sup>

### C. PERCEIVED OR REAL INJUSTICE

Massive terrorist attacks, such as those perpetrated against the public transportation systems in Madrid (2004) and London (2005) were not anticipated in France. The French after all made a conscious decision not to support the U.S.-led effort against Saddam Hussein in the 2003 war in Iraq, in contrast with Great Britain.<sup>104</sup> The French were also proud of their inclusive policies and openly welcomed immigrants of all ethnicities and religions. Their concept of laic assimilation, Neiberg writes, “projects the idea that France forms one solitary unit that does not recognize religious differences for social or political purposes.”<sup>105</sup> What then provoked these young men, the children of fully assimilated French Muslims, represented in government through this concept of laic assimilation, and even present on the nation’s soccer team, to turn against France?

A series of violent events would unfold in the latter part of 2005, and the underlying cause that gave birth to this sequence of terror was a shift from political representation of these Muslim immigrants into far-right anti-immigration and nationalistic sentiment. Neiberg, an award-winning historian, author, and professor at the Army War College, contends this lack of political involvement segregated the French Muslims into sub-categories of French society and led to “spontaneous acts of young French Muslims responding to mostly local issues of alienation, underrepresentation, and persistent unemployment.”<sup>106</sup> The living conditions were harsh, unemployment and poverty high; crammed into banlieues, the French Muslims felt segregated, disassociated, and without political representation. These estranged youths began to live in seclusion in their run down suburbs, oppressed and without hope; it would not be long before they discovered Salafist Islam via the Internet and turned the hate into violence.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Kepel, xii.

<sup>104</sup> Neiberg, “No More Elsewhere,” 21.

<sup>105</sup> Neiberg, 21.

<sup>106</sup> Neiberg, 23.

<sup>107</sup> Neiberg, 24.

The event that shattered this peaceful cohabitation and spurred countrywide riots was in essence a complete accident and a simple misidentification. The police, responding to a burglar call in one of these proletariat suburbs, confronted three likely innocent Muslim youths who out of fear ran from the police. They hid themselves in a power station and accidentally caused an electric charge that killed two of the young Muslims.<sup>108</sup> This unfortunate event served as the catalyst for the release of all the stored-up anger against the government of France. The protests immediately turned into violent riots, and a national state of emergency was declared. Neiberg reports that, when the chaos and dust finally settled, more than 3,000 were imprisoned for burning over 9,000 vehicles nationwide.<sup>109</sup>

With French assimilation and assumed national identity no longer desired by the irritated and violent factions within the Muslim community, so too went the relative peace in France. Before long, with no political motives at the forefront and a loose affiliation with the Islamic State, these oppressed youths began to orchestrate mass terror on a scale that had not been witnessed in France since World War II. The uptick in Islamist-inspired violence began with Mohamed Merah's shooting spree at the Jewish schoolhouse in Toulouse in March 2012 and then increased in late 2014 with four episodes of vehicles ramming pedestrians and multiple stabbing incidents. Two of the most significant terror attacks in France's history occurred in 2015, a year that saw six separate terrorist attacks take the lives of 149 citizens and wound another 377.<sup>110</sup> The infamous *Charlie Hebdo* shootings and the "Stade de France" coordinated attacks were responsible for the majority of the casualties that year. Additionally, two terror plots were foiled that year, one by heroic train passengers and another when the terrorist accidentally shot himself prior to conducting his planned assault on suburban churches in the vicinity of Paris.<sup>111</sup> The violence in 2015 could have been much greater.

In 2016, 89 people were killed and hundreds more injured in five separate terror attacks. French authorities claimed to have prevented another 17 terrorist assaults in the final stages of

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<sup>108</sup> Neiberg, 22.

<sup>109</sup> Neiberg, 22.

<sup>110</sup> "Timeline: Attacks in France," BBC News, sec. Europe, July 26, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33288542>.

<sup>111</sup> "Timeline."

planning prior to execution.<sup>112</sup> Significant among these attacks was the vehicle massacre on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice on the anniversary of Bastille Day. In the aftermath of all this hatred and violence toward a “benevolent” France, politicians and citizens both began to question if this war was actually rooted in religion, senseless violence, or revenge for the poor societal conditions faced by these millennials of migrant descent.

The government’s political integration and cultural assimilation approach was plagued with nationalistic undertones that segregated pockets of Muslim immigrants. The French assimilation model was one of solidarity; it did not politicize based on religious preferences. It offered education in French culture and customs. France was a homogenous and inclusive society that had historically prided itself on its ability to integrate immigrants into its culture that was consequently no longer as successful in this respect. Gradually, but unmistakably, changes in the political landscape in France began marginalizing these Muslim immigrants. Forced into these impoverished suburbs, pushed away from the political scene, and losing representation within the government, the frustration of French Muslims began to rise at a level commensurate with the rising discrimination, unemployment, and nationalism.<sup>113</sup>

The re-emergence of the far-right National Front in the early 2000s brought to the political center-right an anti-Muslim movement that spurred on hatred and racism toward the French Muslim communities. Greatly influenced by the National Front’s significant gains in popular support, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party ran (and won) on a co-opted anti-immigration reform platform. The UMP party subsequently failed to address the high rates of unemployment in the French Muslim minority and supported the Socialist Party’s effort to legalize gay marriage (a lifestyle abhorred by many Muslims).<sup>114</sup> The deck was stacked against the French laic assimilation model, and gradually, through a lack of representation, political obscurity, and ethnic discrimination, violence became the only voice of the oppressed.

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<sup>112</sup> Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2016* (Washington, DC: United States Department of State, 2017), 117, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/272488.pdf>.

<sup>113</sup> Neiberg, “No More Elsewhere,” 21–22.

<sup>114</sup> Neiberg, 23.



This recent spate of terrorist attacks has only served to drive the wedge deeper between long-established French citizens and recent immigrants; it may not be possible for French society to accept immigrants from any country or nationality unless it commits wholly to a comprehensive assimilation into French culture, society, and politics.<sup>115</sup> The French government assumed that Muslim immigrants would assimilate completely and view themselves as French first, but it has not been the case. The National Front political party, renamed the National Rally in June 2018, which is gaining popularity in the recurrent violence in France, has strong anti-immigration views. Its supporters believe that immigration threatens national identity, security, and economic progress; they also believe that the EU is detrimental to their success as a nation. With the far-right parties gaining popularity and nationalism on the rise, in conjunction with increased immigration and failing assimilation, terrorism will remain a threat to French national security and stay at the forefront of European politics.

Beginning with Mohamed Merah, and concluding with Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, the perpetrator of the Bastille Day Parade attack in Nice, all these millennial jihadis, those who committed violence within France in 2012–2016, struggled with identity and integration into French culture and society. All these young Frenchmen were marginalized, most of them jobless. All grew up in the poor banlieues; without hope for a positive future and feeling betrayed by their government, these young Muslim men began to search for meaning and acceptance.

The geopolitical and societal dynamics present in French culture and politics are providing these frustrated and embittered Muslim youths the first enabler toward terrorism; a real or perceived injustice. Lyons-Padilla posits, “personal trauma, shame, humiliation, and perceived maltreatment by society can cause people to feel a loss of self-worth,” which she categorizes as a *loss of significance*.<sup>116</sup> She argues, “the relationship between marginalization and significance loss became stronger with more experiences of discrimination.”<sup>117</sup> Committing to a religious or ideological group can make up for the loss of significance, reduce uncertainty, and fight against the injustice perpetrated by the governing elites. Secular laws, the segregation of large

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<sup>115</sup> Neiberg, 32.

<sup>116</sup> Lyons-Padilla et al., “Belonging Nowhere,” 2.

<sup>117</sup> Lyons-Padilla et al., 6.

populations of Muslim minorities, and blatant discrimination are pushing this trend toward violence. However, many immigrant populations “bear grievances against their host societies,” Lyon-Padilla suggests, “without ever engaging in violence.”<sup>118</sup> What, then, is responsible for turning this hatred toward the government into action against it?

#### **D. SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND GROUP DYNAMICS**

The next step in the radicalization process, evident in this case study of Salafi-jihadism in France, is identification with—and assimilation into—a group that espouses radical ideas and promotes violence. Anna Simons highlights the “diabolical cleverness” of the calculated targeting of today’s youth by Salafi-jihadist movements; she establishes that “adolescents are not just prone to violence because violence *seems* to deliver what they want, but they also prime one another.”<sup>119</sup> Identification with a group or cause can restore a lost sense of belonging and return an individual’s sense of significance, even if it has been stripped away by what he regards as a mundane and oppressive society. These small groups provide a sense of purpose, camaraderie, and accountability, and oftentimes, these groups will shift radically toward the extremes due to internal dynamics and competition.

Many world-renowned terror experts, Sageman among them, believe that it is impossible to map the progression toward violence without group affiliation. He posits, “self-categorization is what makes collective behavior possible.” He argues, “even loners who commit terrorist acts do so because they imagine themselves to be members of a larger social category.”<sup>120</sup> Additionally, the tendency of a group is to move toward the extremes of their collective beliefs. Through “group think” and the fear of being left behind or being viewed as not active or committed enough within the group, members within these small groups encourage activism. Most will try to outdo others within the group to establish themselves as the most passionate among its members.<sup>121</sup> These association dynamics create a compulsive environment that pushes these youths toward the most extreme views espoused within the group.

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<sup>118</sup> Lyons-Padilla et al., 8.

<sup>119</sup> Anna Simons, “Making Enemies,” *The American Interest* 1, no. 4 (2006): 6.

<sup>120</sup> Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, 114.

<sup>121</sup> Tucker, “Terrorism, Networks, and Strategy,” 8–9.

In France, these small groups, those that gave birth to the majority of the millennial jihadi attacks in 2012–2016, are local gangs or terror cells, associations of prison convicts, and recently, online gatherings on the Internet. The Buttes Chaumont terror cell, active in the early 21st century, produced France’s highest-ranking ISIS operative, Salim Benghalem. He served out a prison term, relocated to affiliate with a Paris-based terror cell, completed his radicalization, and went on to serve as a combat leader for ISIS in Aleppo, Syria. During his time in France, Benghalem and his terror network directly influenced Mohamed Merah, Mehdi Nemmouche, the Kouachi brothers, and Amedy Coulibaly; all these jihadis went on to conduct significant terror attacks in France and Belgium.<sup>122</sup> This network of terrorist apprentices, those influenced by former AQ operatives, Salafi-jihadists, and extreme religious clerics, would use the 19th arrondissement’s public park to socialize, foment radical ideas of jihadism, and prepare themselves physically for the future rigors of combat. This small, close-knit group of men quickly espoused the most radical of their newly adopted beliefs, and moved toward the intense violence advocated by their narrative. Every one of them enthusiastically went on to die for his newly found identity and group affiliation.

Another incubator for terrorism and a clear example of how group dynamics can produce extreme activism is found within the French prison system. Of all the high-profile terrorists mentioned earlier, only Said Kouachi, states Kepel, “followed the same activist trajectory but without serving time in prison.”<sup>123</sup> The main radical in the Fleury-Merogis prison who influenced all these inmates and indirectly the Buttes Chaumont cell was Djamel Beghal. Beghal was a trained AQ operative on his way to conduct an attack against his French homeland. Fortunately, he was detained and imprisoned. However, he was allowed to influence the next wave of global jihadis from his prison cell.<sup>124</sup> “Suffice it to note,” declares Roy, “that prison accentuates several phenomena: the generational dimension; revolt against the system; the diffusion of a simplified Salafism; the formation of a tight-knit group; [and] the search for dignity related to respect for the norm: and the reinterpretation of crime as legitimate political

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<sup>122</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, 101.

<sup>123</sup> Kepel, 158.

<sup>124</sup> Kepel, 157.

protest.”<sup>125</sup> Even though Kepel and Roy have divergent views on the causes of terrorism in France, both appear to agree that the prison system drives young men, those searching to recover from a loss of significance, into tightly woven groups offered a religious narrative of revenge against the “corrupt” officials who sent them off to incarceration.

The more devastated these terror groups’ central operational areas become, the more their recruiting, training, and mobilization must adopt a highly decentralized and disconnected network approach.<sup>126</sup> Due to this inability to command from a physical location or train recruits collectively in a sanctuary camp somewhere, terror groups, such as AQ and ISIS, are beginning to rely almost exclusively on the Internet. “The Internet,” remarks Sageman, “makes identification with small, bizarre, or foreign communities much easier and facilitates the emergence of imagined virtual discursive communities.”<sup>127</sup> The Internet is steadily taking over the traditional personal identification and group radicalization process in France. More and more youths are relying on the Internet and are thus bypassing the terror network meetings, radicalizing prison sentences, and personal interface with extreme elders and experienced Salafi-jihadists.

Although the majority of the French men who carried out the *Charlie Hebdo* and the Paris attacks of 2015 were physically recruited and then sent off to training camps to prepare for their decisive moment, Abu Abdel Rahman was certainly not. Kepel clearly details his identification and radicalization process; Rahman’s “consumption [of ISIS propaganda] in front of screens, tablets, and smartphones” and “the warmth of a peer group that ended their [his] loneliness” was motivation enough for him to give up his Western European lifestyle and go to fight for ISIS in Syria.<sup>128</sup> Rahman was the center of the ISIS propaganda campaign for a short time, and then, having been judged as lacking necessary combat skills, he was given a suicide mission and reportedly achieved his martyrdom late in 2013.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 30.

<sup>126</sup> AQ lost its safe haven in Afghanistan after the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, and ISIS began losing the geographical area of its claimed caliphate less than a year after the bold proclamation.

<sup>127</sup> Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, 121.

<sup>128</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, 109.

<sup>129</sup> Kepel, 108.

Mohammed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, one of the most infamous and deadly terrorists in France's history, drove his cargo truck into a crowded Bastille Day celebration on July 14, 2016. The horrific attack on the Promenade des Anglais in the city of Nice, one responsible for 86 deaths and 434 injured, is thought to have been derived from an act of self-radicalization that occurred exclusively via the Internet. Kepel attributes this horrific violence to the ISIS-constructed narrative and online propaganda efforts promoting "extreme violence and bestiality... communicated live over the Internet, and [thereby reaching] the world of neglected immigrant banlieues that are seedbeds of the civil and religious wars that terrorist acts aim to provoke."<sup>130</sup> ISIS quickly claimed responsibility for the Nice attack, which certainly matches the recent trend, that of identification with ISIS, claiming allegiance to Allah during the attack, and ferociously fighting to the death. Although Bouhlel may not have received mentorship or training from any known ISIS-affiliated entity, investigators traced his online activity and concluded that he was indeed sympathetic to ISIS, and identified as a global jihadi.<sup>131</sup> The Internet and the ISIS global jihadi narrative constitute a terror-producing syndicate that the French government continues to contend with in the 21st century.

## **E. RELIGION**

Most individuals can understand how young French Muslim men might feel anger or embitterment toward a government and society that offer them little hope and that seem to condone economic inequality and political marginalization of the Muslim minority. Most would also comprehend the natural craving for a sense of belonging and the desire to be part of a group; one with meaning and purpose. However, what compels these individuals to take that final step toward violence is the extreme ideology narrated by Salafi-jihadism. Simons cautions her peers not to "gloss over the possibility that Islamists want to do us grave harm out of deep spiritual conviction."<sup>132</sup> While some jihadis are keen to fight out of hate or fear, these millennial jihadis in France do not take that step until they have identified with an extreme religious group and convinced themselves that they are a member of the global Islamic jihad. The mandatory

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<sup>130</sup> Kepel, XV.

<sup>131</sup> Kepel, 203.

<sup>132</sup> Simons, "Making Enemies," 2.

stepping-stone, one that precedes violent action in all these incidents of terror, is religious radicalization. “If there is one common denominator among all the ‘French jihadists,’ across all generations and time periods,” declares Thomson, “it is their recognition of *jahiliya*, or a period of pre-Islamic ignorance.”<sup>133</sup> These modern Salafists endorse and promote this Islamic concept. Using Islamic precedent, these extremists indict “lesser” Muslim countries, communities, and individuals and accuse them of living a sinful existence, one that predated the religion and the Prophet. The interpretation of this Qur’anic principle is routinely used to inspire any and all Muslims to fight against opponents of the Islamic faith, which is an individual requirement for all believers, according to their reading of the Qur’an. Religion might not be directly responsible for terrorism, but in some cases, convictions concerning absolute truth might be used to justify terrorism.

Islamism, formerly known as the process of promoting sharia in modern political and popular arenas, has turned violent and undefinable, if not unrecognizable. The Arab Spring of 2010–2011 brought many modern Islamists into power, yet the military coup in Egypt toppled a newly elected Islamist government. The deadly uprising of ISIS has brought even more concern and confusion to the term Islamism, especially since ISIS gained worldwide recognition in 2014.<sup>134</sup> This formerly political idea is now spurring on religious violence against anyone who is not Salafist. This manifestation has caused much confusion and has proved maddening to analysts attempting to understand this post-modern violent epidemic of radicalization in the name of Islam.

Although many scholars have attempted to minimize the effect of religion on this jihadi phenomenon, some labeling the greater ISIS movement as purely un-Islamic, this recent spate of violence is fundamentally a religiously inspired movement. Wood concludes that ISIS is a millenarian group whose foundations, ideology, and prophecy are deeply rooted in orthodox Islamic fundamentalism. The top clerics of these Islamist terror groups certainly envisage themselves as leaders of an Islamic jihad waging war for the survival and triumph of the faith.

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<sup>133</sup> David Thomson, *The Returned: They Left to Wage Jihad, Now They’re Back* (Boston: Polity Press, 2018), 234.

<sup>134</sup> Olivier Roy, “Political Islam after the Arab Spring,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 6 (November 2017): 127–32.

The *hudud* (punishments mandated by sharia law), which is practiced within the Caliphate and abhorred almost universally in the West, is profoundly Quranic. According to Wood, even the rape, torture, and massacre of the Yazidis practiced by ISIS in the Caliphate were not without Islamic precedent.<sup>135</sup> While many of the foot soldiers are recent converts, just beginning to understand the religion and their period of *jahiliya*, the leaders, scholars, and clerics at the core of these terror groups are profoundly religious in their narrative. McCants confirms this assessment, “the caliph has a Ph.D. in the study of the Qur’an, and his top scholars are conversant in the *ahidith* and the ways medieval scholars interpreted it.”<sup>136</sup> The *ahidith* is a first-hand historical collection of jurisprudential rulings, recorded sayings, and actions documented by those who lived with the Prophet Mohammed. According to Muslims, this Islamic literature is eclipsed in importance only by the divine revelation of the Qur’an. Islamist propagandists and clerics do take a “pick and choose” approach that fits their strategic methodology, but, as McCants’ analysis suggests, “anyone who reads and acts on scripture does that.”<sup>137</sup>

This public dissemination of religious propaganda mixed with bits and pieces of authentic religious literature and horrific images of Muslims suffering at the hands of invading non-believers and apostate leaders began to circulate via the Internet around 2012. Almost immediately, the beleaguered and frustrated youth of France quickly absorbed these radical images of suffering, and displaying empathy toward the victims, began to identify with the global jihadi effort. Soon pictures of gun-wielding “defenders of religion” began to populate social media sites. Although Thomson admits that most of these “five-star jihadis” were “pretending to act as the sole defenders of their religion,” this ISIS narrative “provides these bruised egos with dignity, social status and faith in spiritual transcendence.”<sup>138</sup> This jihadi project, which is advertised easily via the Internet, gives these youths seeking meaning and significance a warrant to engage in violence and attribute that violence to Islam. Thomson

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<sup>135</sup> Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, March 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

<sup>136</sup> William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: Picador, 2015), 150.

<sup>137</sup> McCants, 150.

<sup>138</sup> Thomson, *The Returned*, 232.

concludes, “the power of real religious beliefs and the myth of the favours granted to martyrs cannot be ignored when determining what triggers lead to violence.”<sup>139</sup>

## F. CONCLUSION

As previously illustrated, terrorism expert Roy presented radicalization in France as violence attributed to religion, which is essentially an alibi for nihilistic criminals who make a personal decision to conduct heinous acts of violence with impunity.<sup>140</sup> Numerous other authors, Sageman, Coolsaet, and Kepel among them, have attributed the causes of terrorism to the government, society, and the socio-economic environment that together create a subculture of marginalized, economically repressed, and alienated minorities who seemingly believe that they have no other recourse but to utilize violence to be heard and recognized.

It is relevant to conclude that no French scholar in the salafi-jihadism or terrorism milieu, to include award-winning journalist and author David Thomson, can completely discredit the effect of religion and the global jihad narrative. This research concerning the French millennial jihadis, those active in 2012–2016, suggests that any hypothesis would be incomplete without considering the pathway of enablers that have repeatedly led these millennials toward a life of religion-inspired terrorism. First, living conditions, societal structure, political representation, legal secularism, and poor future prospects of these Muslim youths, contribute to a perceived or real sense of injustice in relation to the “oppressive” government. Next, these marginalized millennials form or find an identity within groups of like-minded individuals. Then, the pathology of group dynamics runs its natural progression. Whether via prison, terror cell, or the Internet, these institutions provide an isolated environment that allows this identity to metastasize into action. The only thing that remains is an alibi to perform heinous acts of violence, actions that do not come naturally to most people and that need an ideological or religious narrative to justify. The Salafi-jihadist movement and the “clash of civilizations” narrative, a story spun up for the sole purpose of recruiting those capable of committing horrific

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<sup>139</sup> Thomson, 233.

<sup>140</sup> Christopher de Bellaigue, “Jihad and Death by Olivier Roy Review—The Global Appeal of Islamic State,” *The Guardian (London)*, April 21, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/21/jihad-and-death-the-global-appeal-of-islamic-state-by-olivier-roy-review>.



acts of violence on behalf of a religiously interpreted movement, provoke that most difficult and least initiated final step. This combination of enablers, not just one predominant cause, has driven these millennials to take up the sword for the “greater jihad.”

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#### IV. CONTINUITY, CHANGE, AND SIGNIFICANCE

Foreign fighter returnees, in many ways, functioned as the connective tissues between these disparate cells. They plotted, organized, and recruited locals for these attacks, representing a greater threat than mere numbers might initially suggest. And, finally, it is clear from the timeline that opportunities for intervention existed in the run-up to the attacks in Paris and Brussels. The challenge for intelligence and law enforcement officials—as always—was to find the pattern in the noise of threats, rhetoric, and the wider conflict in Syria and Iraq.<sup>141</sup>

—R. Kim Cragin

Between the Toulouse and Montauban attacks in 2012 masterminded by AQ-inspired Frenchman Mohamed Merah, and the devastating cargo truck attack on Bastille Day in 2016 perpetrated by the ISIS-inspired and self-radicalized Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, 245 persons of all ethnicities and with varying religious convictions were killed by Islamic-inspired jihadi terrorists in France.<sup>142</sup> “Of all the countries of the West,” judges Thomson, “France is the most threatened, targeted and affected by jihadism. Not only by the Islamic State, but also by Al Qaeda, which remains a very real threat today.”<sup>143</sup> In its 2018 European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, EUROPOL revealed that 373 of 705 “suspects arrested for religiously inspired/jihadist terrorism in EU Member States in 2017” were from France.<sup>144</sup> Evident from the story these statistics tell is the fact that the threat of terrorism is present, pervasive, and concentrated in France, which is responsible for over one-half of all religious extremist arrests in the EU. This chapter endeavors to highlight several concepts, theories, and reasoned approaches that, through proper contextual understanding of the challenge, aim to lessen the current threat that millennial jihadis present to the government of France.

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<sup>141</sup> Cragin, “The November 2015 Paris Attacks,” 226.

<sup>142</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, IX.

<sup>143</sup> Thomson, *The Returned*, 231.

<sup>144</sup> EUROPOL, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2018* (The Hague, Netherlands: European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, 2018), 22.

This chapter comprises three sections and takes on the challenge of answering the following questions: What remained essentially the same between France's first experience with Salafi-Jihadism in the 1990s and the spate of terrorism in France in 2012–2016? What is different about this modern carnage? What is significant, if anything, about these continuities and changes? How can those variances, if analyzed in the proper framework, inform potential steps toward diminishing terrorism in France? In the first section, this thesis highlights the similarities between the GIA, France's first occurrence of Islamic-inspired terrorism of the early 1990s and the 21st century millennial jihadis. The next section explores the differences between these two groups by analyzing their structures, demographics and scales, and the communication methods practiced by each of these terror groups. In the last section, this thesis considers the significance of notable continuities and changes and presents relevant procedural changes and recommendations that may serve to help minimize the effects of the message, the manpower, and the medium that instigates religious-inspired terrorism in France. With a proper understanding of these modern Salafi-jihadist religious narratives, group radicalization mechanisms and motivations, and communication methods utilized by these millennial jihadis in 2012–2016, this thesis presents an informed perspective on what should be considered *new*, and more importantly, *why* it matters. Figure 2 shows the characteristics and overlap of religion-inspired terrorism in France from the perspective of the GIA and Millennial jihadis.

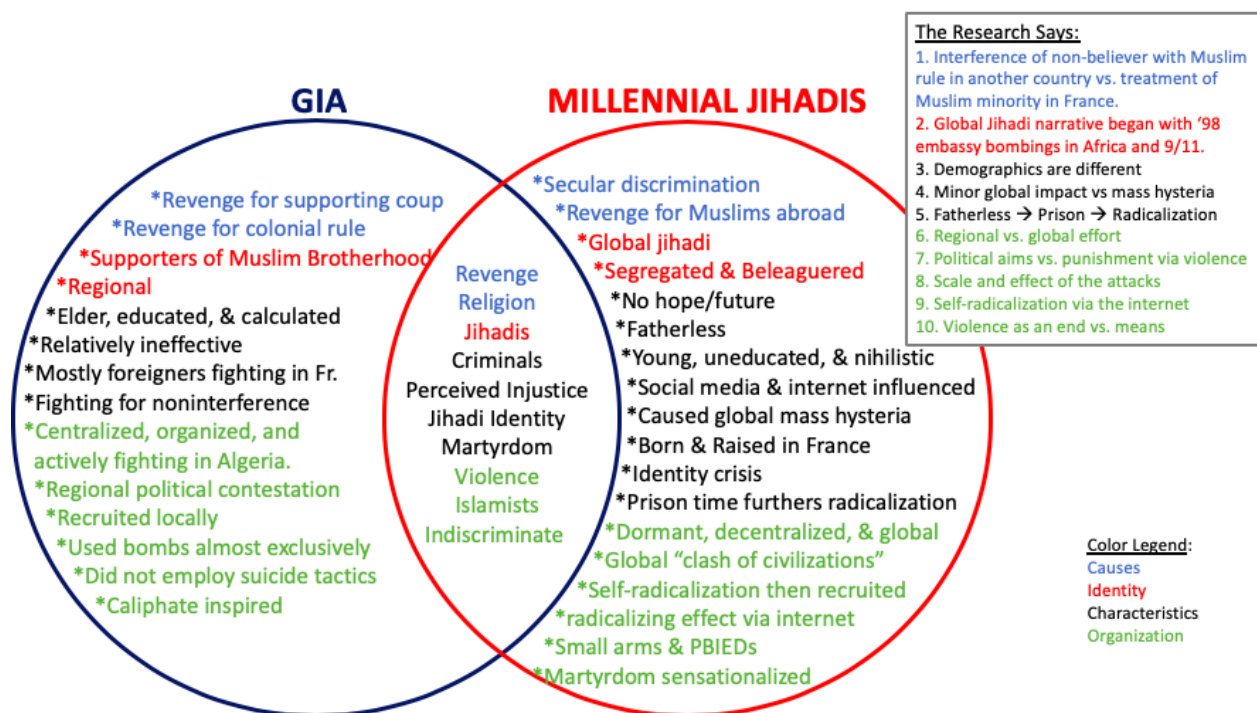


Figure 2. Characteristics of Religion-inspired Terrorism in France<sup>145</sup>

## A. CONTINUITIES OF ISLAMIC-INSPIRED TERROR IN FRANCE

Some prolific commentators on terrorism maintain that terrorism occurring in the 21st century is not anything new. “Of course,” Roy contends, “neither terrorism nor jihad is a new phenomenon.”<sup>146</sup> To be precise, however, new associations with unique characteristics, post-

<sup>145</sup> Adapted from Haroro J. Ingram, “An Analysis of Inspire Ad Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State’s Propaganda War,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 5 (2017): 357, 365–68, 372; Kepel, *Terror in France*, XV, 7–8, 19, 21, 27–29, 90–91, 98–109, 119, 130, 143, 168–69; Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2017), 39, 53, 67, 140–41, 185, 207–11; McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 147–48, 150–51, 153, 156–59; Neiberg, “No More Elsewhere,” 22, 24–25, 30; Nesser, *Islamist Terror in Europe*, 67–68, 70–71, 73, 75–76, 78–80, 85; Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 17–18, 30, 37–39, 48–49, 58, 98–99; Shapiro, “French Responses to Terrorism from the Algerian War to the Present,” 270–73, 275–76; Thomson, *The Returned*, 114, 231–34, 237.

<sup>146</sup> Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 1. Martha Crenshaw furthers this debate on the continuities and changes between “new” and “old” terrorism. Her conclusion reinforces the foundation of this thesis, that terrorism is unique in each country, each experience, and each epoch, and that it must be meticulously investigated to be understood completely. Crenshaw concludes, “A point of agreement between ‘new’ and ‘old’ terrorism schools is that the problem of terrorism will persist for some time, which makes it all the more necessary to develop a common understanding of the historical evolution of this form of political violence.” For background, see Crenshaw’s article for further reflection into this ongoing and largely unresolved debate. Martha Crenshaw, “‘New’ vs. ‘Old’

modern religious interpretations, and redefined motivations were responsible for a more nihilistic and violent strain of terrorism in 2012–2016.

What are the characteristics of religion-inspired terrorism in France that appear to be constants, those present in the 1990s that are still visible in today's millennial jihadis? The most notable include the indiscriminate nature of the terrorist attacks, the religious narrative, and the self-identification as a jihadi, and the criminal experience of these individuals that led them to a life of terrorist activity.

### **1. Indiscriminate Violence**

First, both waves of Islamic-inspired terrorism in France are characterized by their victims, which are principally chosen indiscriminately without concern for their ethnicity, national origin, religion, age, or gender. Nesser, commenting on the target selection of the GIA terror attacks in France in the 1990s, concluded, “the attacks aimed to murder randomly selected French citizens en masse.”<sup>147</sup> Similarly, during the November 2015 Paris attacks, Kepel found that millennial jihadis “struck Parisians indiscriminately, without respect to the diversity of their origins. The random machine-gunning of sidewalk cafes and restaurants in Paris neighborhoods with large numbers of immigrants or descendants of immigrants and the carnage at the Bataclan both attest to this, as does the systematic use of explosive vests in the manner of the suicide attacks carried out in the Near East.”<sup>148</sup> This indiscriminate use of violence is present in nearly all the terrorist incidents in France in 2012–2016, and especially evident in the 2016 Bastille Day attack that arbitrarily took the lives of men, women, and children, 30 of whom were Muslims.<sup>149</sup>

### **2. Religious Ideology**

Secondly, both of these spates of terrorism were grounded in fundamental religious beliefs and violent ideological concepts formulated to gain necessary backing and support to commit acts of violence. Recruiting in mosques, prisons, and Islamic-affiliated entities, the GIA

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Terrorism: A Critical Appraisal,” in *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge in Europe*, ed. Rik Coolsaet (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2008), 67.

<sup>147</sup> Nesser, *Islamist Terror in Europe*, 75.

<sup>148</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, XV.

<sup>149</sup> Kepel, XVIII.

aimed to recruit fighters to install an Islamic state in Algeria. This effort could only be accomplished through jihad against the apostate regime and the Western colonial influence that supported the military intervention and was responsible for the cancellation of an election that was expected to bring Islamic governance to power in Algeria.<sup>150</sup> The GIA accused the Algerian government and its people of *jahiliyya* (living in a state preceding the creation of Islam, essentially living in ignorance of the faith) and vowed to restore the faith and the enforcement of Sharia law. “Through holy war, or jihad,” observed Shapiro, “the GIA wanted not just to take power in Algeria but also to reestablish the Caliphate, the only form of government recognized by Islamic tradition.”<sup>151</sup>

Modern terrorist groups, those influencing the millennial jihadis of France, have expanded their struggle through holy war from a regional contestation to a global *clash of civilizations* narrative. McCants found that modern terrorist theology “is nearly identical to Wahhabism, the ultraconservative form of Islam found in Saudi Arabia,” and uses “a propaganda mix of apocalypticism, puritanism, sectarianism, ultraviolence, and promises of a caliphate” to recruit and replenish its manpower.<sup>152</sup> This continuity in Islamic-inspired terrorism is important because it demonstrates a pervasive attraction to extreme religious ideology and a magnetism that persists today, as in the 1990s and before. Referencing the attributes of post-modern religion-inspired terrorism, Simons remarked, “at its core there is a religious and divinely mandated template as old as the Quran itself.”<sup>153</sup> The use of religious narrative to promote violence against an adversary may be as old as terrorism itself.

### **3. Crime—Terror Nexus**

Just as Khaled Kelkal, the ringleader of the GIA terror cell in France, was radicalized during a period of incarceration, so too were the majority of millennial jihadis active in France in 2012–2016. “Suffice it to note,” Roy wrote, “that prison accentuates several phenomena: the generational dimension; revolt against the system; the diffusion of a simplified Salafism; the

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<sup>150</sup> Nesser, *Islamist Terror in Europe*, 70.

<sup>151</sup> Shapiro, “French Responses to Terrorism from the Algerian War to the Present,” 271.

<sup>152</sup> McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 151, 153.

<sup>153</sup> Simons, “Making Enemies,” 2.

formation of a tight-knit group; the search for dignity related to respect for the norm; and the reinterpretation of crime as legitimate political protest.”<sup>154</sup> While imprisoned, Kelkal was taught Arabic, he learned to pray, he was introduced to the Quran, and he quickly espoused the radical ideals of religious warfare. Immediately following his release, he was contacted and recruited to serve as an operational cell leader for the GIA in France. A similar story of radicalization could be written of nearly all the millennial jihadis examined in Chapter II. According to Kepel, Coulibaly, the mastermind behind the Hyper Casher and *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in January 2015, was “a petty criminal who, like many others, discovered in prison a redemptive radical Islamism into which he threw himself headlong.”<sup>155</sup> Just as was the case in the 1990s, the cells of France’s prison system are serving as incubation chambers for Salafist ideology to indoctrinate those vulnerable to a radical message of revolt, and give these millennial jihadis an identity and group affiliation that propels them toward violence.

## **B. CHANGES: GIA VS. FRENCH MILLENNIAL JIHADIS**

Although many of the documented characteristics of terrorism are similar and continuities exist between the GIA of the 1990s and contemporary millennial jihadis, the environment has changed dramatically since the GIA was active in France during the early 1990s. The structural changes, including interconnectedness through the advent of the Internet, and more recently, social media, and the background and motivations of millennial jihadis, are vastly different from what France faced during its first wave of religion-inspired terrorism of the 1990s.

### **1. Organization Structure**

The organizational structure of today’s millennial jihadis, those routinely influenced by terrorist organizations like the Islamic State and AQ, is substantially different from what the GIA utilized in Algeria and France in the early 1990s. The GIA was a deeply networked, interconnected, and hierarchical organization. Its structure was made up of interrelated and recognizable connections that presented an easier target for the French government authorities

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<sup>154</sup> Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 30.

<sup>155</sup> Kepel, *Terror in France*, 32.



striving to identify critical nodal relationships and allowed for expeditious and effective targeting during counterterrorism operations. The GIA in Algeria was divided into nine battalions that fought within assigned zones of operations. According to Nesser, the GIA had “central leadership, an advisory council, an executive body,” with “local branches throughout the country.”<sup>156</sup> When the Algerian GIA leadership decided to conduct its first jihadi attacks in France, this practice of hierarchy and operational command exposed the structure of the French terror cell under the leadership of a poor Algerian immigrant named Khaled Kelkal. In just four months, Shapiro noted, “French authorities were able to track down those responsible and dissolve the networks that supported them.”<sup>157</sup>

In contrast, recent terror trends in France point to a “leaderless” jihad. With increasingly little or no connection to an overarching authority, these loose networks of groups and sometimes individuals, which are held together only by ideology, are coalescing, radicalizing, and then seeking recruitment and utilization. These small cells are difficult to detect, to penetrate, and (even more difficult) to target. Even in France’s heightened *state of urgency*, which resulted in an exhaustive nationwide effort involving military action, judicial reform, and extensive counterterrorism efforts that easily dwarfed the 400 law enforcement officers tasked with taking down the GIA, the cumulative counterterrorism effects have not been nearly as decisive against the decentralized, leaderless, and disconnected terrorism that France faces in the 21st century.<sup>158</sup> Today’s millennial jihadis can remain entirely unknown to government authorities, who are recruited, radicalized, and motivated to undertake violent action exclusively via the Internet. They can therefore remain anonymous, little noticed, and nearly undetectable prior to committing acts of terrorism.

## **2. Utilization of Online Mediums**

Post-modern terrorist organizations are becoming experts in employing new media to broadcast their message to a global audience via the Internet and social media platforms to

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<sup>156</sup> Nesser, *Islamist Terror in Europe*, 74.

<sup>157</sup> Shapiro, “French Responses to Terrorism from the Algerian War to the Present,” 272.

<sup>158</sup> Shapiro, 272.

provide them with a more anonymous, pervasive, and distributable platform than was available in the 1990s. “Online propaganda continues to be an essential part of jihadist terrorist attempts to reach out to EU audiences for recruitment, radicalisation [sic] and fundraising. The often rudimentary and fragmented knowledge of Islam of aspiring jihadist terrorists, derived from religious texts selected to fit a violent ideology, makes them vulnerable to being influenced and used by those who misuse religion to incite violence.”<sup>159</sup>

With the advent of the Internet, social media, and a recent and widely disseminated Salafi-Jihadism narrative, previously nonexistent splinter cells unaffiliated with the larger terrorist organizations are materializing, self-radicalizing, and seeking out opportunities to commit violence on behalf of their newly assimilated identity. As Roy has remarked, “the upshot of this is significant: radicalization precedes recruitment.”<sup>160</sup> This sequence of terror generation is markedly different from the traditional recruitment, radicalization, and utilization patterns practiced by the GIA. Once these groups or individual jihadis complete their virtual acclimatization and become self-radicalized, they can immediately act on their own or seek out a member of a terrorist organization for subsequent assignment and utilization. “This means that destroying outside organizations,” Roy argued, “will not put an end to radicalization. If outside organizations like AQ and ISIS thus draw from an existing pool they did little to create, then it is indeed the internal causes of radicalization that must be studied.”<sup>161</sup> Although these high-profile terrorist organizations continue to present a global threat and must be resisted and denied safe havens to train personnel, foment antagonism, and plan their atrocities, the contemporaneous threat resides in the message, the medium, and the manpower that these terrorist organizations are acquiring with relatively little effort.

### **3. Martyrdom and Suicide Operations**

Finally, the fascination with death, which is present in all the millennial jihadis discussed, is a new characteristic of post-modern terrorism as well. According to Roy, “this systemic choice

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<sup>159</sup> EUROPOL, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2018*, 30.

<sup>160</sup> Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 38.

<sup>161</sup> Roy, 38–39.

of death is new. The perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in France in the 1970s and 1980s, whether or not they had any connection with the Middle East, carefully planned their escape.”<sup>162</sup> With regard to the GIA active in France in the 1990s, Nesser concluded, “apart from the Air France hijacking, none of the attacks were suicide missions. In general, suicide attacks were not yet a widespread tactic among the Islamists of the 1990s.”<sup>163</sup> This new fervent jihadism or simple nihilism, whichever it may be, is driving these millennial jihadis to die in the commission of their acts of terror. They no longer plan for escape, go underground to avoid capture, or seek to continue their resistance while imprisoned.<sup>164</sup> Rather, they strap explosives to themselves, and by committing suicide, attempt to achieve a martyr’s death. Even those without the materials or knowledge to make suicide vests are putting up such a stiff resistance that they are forcing responding military or law enforcement personnel to dispatch them. Indeed, “suicide by cop” would be an accurate description of the recent phenomenon.<sup>165</sup>

### C. SIGNIFICANCE: FUTURE IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the notable continuities and changes identified, it is necessary to discuss the importance of these factors and how properly addressing them may promote non-violent social interactions in France. In his explanation of these “new radicals,” Roy highlighted the significance of post-modern terror—with French jihadis among that new wave—and the proclivity of these young people to join the growing number of converts with less and less effort from the terrorist organization.<sup>166</sup> Recruiting and propaganda efforts are becoming omnipresent, vivid, and easily accessible via the medium of the Internet. With fewer small groups, cells, and networks physically operating within France, it is necessary to enhance and extend deradicalization efforts into this new medium of recruitment and radicalization.

Yet, as has been seen in France, nearly all terrorists in 2012–2016 have been influenced by—or have been part of—a small radicalized group. The line between physical group

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<sup>162</sup> Roy, 2.

<sup>163</sup> Nesser, *Islamist Terror in Europe*, 76.

<sup>164</sup> Nesser, 75.

<sup>165</sup> Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 18.

<sup>166</sup> Roy, 17.

radicalization and on-line recruitment has been blurred. With the exception of the Nice attacker, who was radicalized entirely via the Internet, it is unclear whether physical or online mediums are more effective in inspiring French jihadis to commit religion-inspired violence. Consequently, it is pertinent to address the significance of the physical and virtual mediums, as well as the extreme messaging and harsh reality of waging jihad. If these channels are targeted with accurate and lucid deradicalization methods, the result should be a positive reduction in the number of millennial jihadis, and consequently, fewer Islamic-inspired terrorist attacks in France.

## **1. Manpower—Deradicalization of Groups**

### ***a. Prisons***

In France, it was discovered that criminals, those convicted of both petty crimes and also those serving out lengthy prison terms, have a higher likelihood of becoming radicalized through Salafism than do their counterparts in society who commit crimes and are not caught and imprisoned for it. “Criminal behavior,” in Thomson’s view, “is ‘jihadized’ by rendering what is illegal under French law compatible with Islam. The criminal is no longer pushed to change his lifestyle, but, on the contrary, receives transcendental blessing from his actions.”<sup>167</sup> Their similar societal contexts and norms can easily propel criminals and jihadis into a long-term mutually beneficial relationship. “These factors,” Thomson found, “turn prison into an ideal breeding ground for jihadism, among a population that is particularly susceptible to its message.”<sup>168</sup> In 2016, among the 68,800 prisoners nationwide, it was assessed that 1,400 petty criminals or common-law violators were going through an active radicalization process.<sup>169</sup> Add to that figure the known Salafists and convicted jihadis imprisoned that same year and the total religious extremist number climbs to 1,735 and represents two and a half percent of the entire national inmate population in France.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Thomson, *The Returned*, 237.

<sup>168</sup> Thomson, 237.

<sup>169</sup> Thomson, 113.

<sup>170</sup> Thomson, 113.

The deradicalization of French prison systems will turn down this message of violence and retribution, but it can only be done through education and vigilance inside the barbed-wired fences and concrete walls. Prisoners sympathetic to groups like AQ and the Islamic State and those radicalizing these millennial jihadis often display blatant terrorist discourse with impunity, openly and loudly within the prison system. Although uncensored communication with people on the outside is certainly forbidden, it is not unusual to see social media exchanges between radical inmates, prisoners with illegal cellphones, and other French jihadis fighting for the Islamic State. These lines of communication to the jihadi vanguard provide prison inmates with the latest news about the caliphate in Iraq and Syria and energize their radical motivations. The supply of illicit communications devices, which are typically hidden in care packages or thrown over prison walls and fences to be smuggled into the prison from the exercise yards, must be stopped. Higher prison fences, heightened screening procedures for the receipt of care packages, and properly educated prison personnel would appropriately isolate this susceptible population by preventing any affirmation, encouragement, or messaging from extremists beyond the confines of these prison incubation chambers.<sup>171</sup>

***b. Cells, Networks, and Foreign Fighters***

As previously detailed and evident in the history and influence of the Buttes Chaumont terror network, which was active in France during the early 2000s and gave birth to this population of millennial jihadis, small groups, networks, and foreign fighters still present a pervasive terrorist threat in France. While many of France's jihadis were still imprisoned and proved that the Buttes Chaumont terror cell was not a "one-off" occurrence, French authorities discovered another homegrown network supporting AQ in Iraq by funneling in support and fighters from France. The *Artigat* network was dismantled in 2007, but key jihadis from this terror cell contributed to the overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia and were responsible, according to Filiu, "for two political assassinations that nearly derailed the democratic transition in Tunisia" in 2013.<sup>172</sup> Filiu advised French authorities to deepen their understanding of the actions taken

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<sup>171</sup> Thomson, 113–14.

<sup>172</sup> Filiu, "Terrorism in Europe," 45.

against this unparalleled threat and “the role of these French jihad ‘veterans’ over the course of more than a decade.”<sup>173</sup>

As the caliphate and its claimed territory have all but disappeared in recent years, French foreign fighter “veterans” are finding their way back to France and attempting to integrate back into French society.<sup>174</sup> Some of these returnees are captured, prosecuted, and sent directly into the prison systems, some reenter illegally, and the French government has given some a “free pass” who are reintegrated almost immediately. “It was estimated that in 2016,” wrote Filiu, “some 600 French citizens were fighting among the ranks of Daesh.”<sup>175</sup> Consequently, it is absolutely necessary to standardize appropriate prosecution and sentencing of these returning jihadis to deter future extremism and violence. Additionally, deradicalization protocols and requirements for these returning jihadis must be clearly defined. Thomson interviewed several of France’s foreign fighters who have spent significant time inside the Islamic State terror organization, an organization that has routinely planned and carried out attacks against France. These returning fighters still carry with them deep religious and extreme ideological views, as well as an aggressively antagonistic resentment toward the government of France. Some of these hardline extremists have not been prosecuted and have instead been given leniency and encouragement to reintegrate into society without going through any formalized deradicalization process; some have spent as little as 96 hours in police custody after returning to French soil.<sup>176</sup> This effort is insufficiently deradicalizing these religious “warriors,” notably those obsessed with striking a blow against France. As a result, hostile and hate-filled jihadis are reintegrating back to society. Anything less than a comprehensive punishment and standardized deradicalization process represents a significant security threat to France, Europe, and the West.

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<sup>173</sup> Filiu, 45.

<sup>174</sup> As of December 2018, the U.S. Department of Defense estimates the Islamic State to have over 30,000 militants in Iraq and Syria together. Despite these alarmingly high estimates, the IS Caliphate has shrunk to less than 1% of the geographical area it occupied in 2015, when the Islamic State made its bold proclamation and seized control of large areas of sovereign territory in Iraq and Syria. BBC News, “After the Caliphate: Has IS Been Defeated.”

<sup>175</sup> Filiu, “Terrorism in Europe,” 43.

<sup>176</sup> Thomson, *The Returned*, 131–34.

As the number of returning fighters begins to overtake the number of those departing on their jihad, local authorities are becoming overwhelmed by the influx of this hazardous demographic and the threat that it poses. Some of the fighters returning from the battlefields in the Levant are disheartened with the inconsistencies of the message propagated by the Islamic State, the reality of life under the caliphate, and the brutality of combat. These dismayed and disillusioned jihadis should be given an opportunity to explain the disparity between the Islamic State's utopian claims and its grim reality; this approach would almost certainly result in a more effective counter-messaging effort. This counter-narrative should not be made on "black and white" religious grounds whereby hardline extremists can maintain their bi-polar paradigm of "true" Islam and non-believers. Social, gender, and national identities should be emphasized in this deradicalization message to undercut extremist narratives.<sup>177</sup> Horrific stories from fighters with first-hand experience would be more impactful than discourses by religious clerics denouncing the Islamic State; an effort that has been dismissed by Islamic State ideologues and that has proven ineffective in countering the extreme religious views of these Islamic extremists.

*c. Chat Groups and Social Media Networks*

To defeat the message delivered by post-modern terrorist groups in an increasingly interconnected virtual environment and to minimize the effect of that message on the target audience, extensive censorship and disruption efforts must be sustained. In an expansive counter propaganda effort in 2016–2017, "IS online dissemination capabilities were heavily curtailed by the increasing disruption efforts led by social media companies working jointly with law enforcement agencies and government bodies."<sup>178</sup> This censorship ended the monthly publication *Rumiyah*,<sup>179</sup> which was published and distributed electronically through websites and social media outlets in 11 European languages. This information-suppression effort severely diminished the Islamic State's ability to proselytize to non-Arabic speakers and thus diminished

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<sup>177</sup> Ingram, "An Analysis of Inspire Ad Dabiq," 372.

<sup>178</sup> EUROPOL, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2018*, 30.

<sup>179</sup> The word *Rumiyah* means Rome. It is a reference to an Islamic belief that Muslims will conquer Constantinople and Rome.

its capability to recruit new jihadis for its campaigns. If the medium, censored properly, disrupts the ability to broadcast the message, the number of manpower recruits should diminish as well.

## **2. The Message—Counter the “Clash of Civilizations” Narrative**

The transformation that occurs when millennial jihadis are accepted into a radical group involves a quasi-familial acceptance and establishes an apparent hierarchical relationship between scholar and warrior. “Salafists,” according to Kepel, “were those who understood the injunctions of the sacred texts in their most literal, traditional sense. The Salafists were the real fundamentalists of Islam; they were hostile to any and all innovation, which they condemned as mere human interpretation.”<sup>180</sup> Jihadis, including the millennial jihadis in France, represent a numerically microscopic fraction of the Salafist hardliners. These individuals are typically not clerics or sheiks, or educated in Islamic jurisprudence; rather, they generally receive their authentication for violence from these purists. Moyano has analyzed the subservient nature of the foot soldiers of such violent groups, “The transformation of the guerrilla group into a surrogate family leads to an obliteration of the individual conscience. Through emotional and/or peer pressure combatants obey the policies decided within the upper echelons of the organization, and do not voice their opposition even though they may consider those policies erroneous.”<sup>181</sup> Even though a clear distinction exists between guerrilla warfare and terrorism, the same group dynamics are operative and the same level of fanatical support from jihadis to religious purists is apparent within the violent groups observed in France. Therefore, it would be an empty and pointless effort to focus deradicalization efforts exclusively on those fighting the jihad and ignore those who attempt to mastermind the global effort through the interpretation of sacred texts and Islamic jurisprudence.

The brutal truth, as Maher concluded, “is that Salafi-Jihadism remains an extremely resilient soteriology. Despite domestic repression, civil war, and an international ‘War on Terror,’ it has endured and survived more than three decades of forceful repression.”<sup>182</sup> The

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<sup>180</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 220.

<sup>181</sup> Moyano, *Argentina’s Lost Patrol*, 6.

<sup>182</sup> Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, 211.



“clash of civilizations” narrative and the purists that promote it must be targeted simultaneously to dissuade the religious fanatics who endorse this discourse and decrease the frequency and magnitude of religion-inspired violence by French millennial jihadis. If the message can be debunked, the Salafists discredited, and the ensuing fissures between the jihadis and the purists exploited, the message of struggle between Islam and the West will have less impact on these impressionable young millennials.

Due to the significant and catastrophic losses that the Islamic State suffered through 2017, namely the geographic territory that its leaders claimed as their caliphate, it seems less beneficial and urgent now to discredit the idyllic image of caliphate life. However, it would be constructive to give the disillusioned jihadis, many of them coming home from Islamic State battlefields dejected, the opportunity to explain their radical pasts, their involvement in these terror networks, and the violent reality of their experiences. This approach assumes that the truth may be powerful enough to prevent future radicalization from occurring, at least in some cases. It may be exactly the counter-narrative necessary for many of these millennial jihadis to disengage from the radical “clash of civilizations” narrative. “The radical must be allowed to speak,” according to Roy, “just as the law courts allowed an anarchist or serial killer to speak at length in the nineteenth century.”<sup>183</sup> These jihadis must be given a voice; their motivations, actions, and disagreements must be closely examined so that government and counterterrorism experts across the globe are aware of the many traps and pitfalls that await young men and women in today’s society.

According to Maher, Salafi-Jihadism is fundamentally a “militaristic ideology” that saw its greatest development and anti-Western application immediately following the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>184</sup> The appeal of the Islamic State and its ability to recruit from the impressionable youths of France is only sustainable so long as it is able to retain and expand its territory. Since offensive military action has prevented it from doing so, it should be less appealing for potential foreign fighters to leave their homelands to support a failing effort. The military loss of “prophetic” territory, like Dabiq,

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<sup>183</sup> Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 99.

<sup>184</sup> Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, 208.

at the hands of the “Romans” should undermine the credibility of the prophecy and discredit the “Islam versus the West” narrative. Furthermore, if the Islamic State is prevented from declaring “caliph 2.0” and denied territory in “prophetic” geographical areas, its narrative will continue to lose appeal among potential French jihadis, which will decrease the number of foreign fighters supporting their efforts in the Levant.

### **3. Medium—Internet Censorship**

The 2017 EUROPOL EU “Terrorism Situation and Trend Report” confirms, “online propaganda continues to be an essential part of jihadist terrorist attempts to reach out to EU audiences for recruitment, radicalisation [sic], and fundraising.”<sup>185</sup> In many of the incidents of terrorism in France in 2012–2016, the perpetrators had an undeveloped knowledge of Islam. French millennial jihadis often discovered religion just months before committing their violent acts and blindly trusted uncorroborated Internet sources and the radical interpretations of Islamic texts, laws, and jurisprudence intentionally and strategically misrepresented to motivate violence. The medium and the message that it delivers provide much of the human and material assets used by these terror groups to conduct violent attacks in France. The medium must be targeted as precisely as the message and those who are radicalized by it.

Due to effective targeting and censorship campaigns, terrorist propaganda, extreme religious literature, and other terrorist-related content printed in English and published via online platforms have diminished considerably. However, increased censorship is necessary to minimize the distribution of Arabic content already archived online and overlooked by large social media platforms with global reach. The 2018 EUROPOL *Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* found, “Arabic content...as well as emotive chants (anashid) and non-visual content, was still widely available and accessible on Facebook and YouTube.”<sup>186</sup> U.S.-based social media companies (such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube), which have been utilized to spread Islamic-inspired terrorist agendas, have become highly sensitive to videos promoting and displaying brutality and terrorist content published in English. However, these media need to

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<sup>185</sup> EUROPOL, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2018*, 30.

<sup>186</sup> EUROPOL, 32.

scrutinize further and purge terrorist content published in Arabic, and they should be provided government assistance and direction to accomplish this effort. Only through a collaborative and all-inclusive effort can governments across the globe deny these social media and online platforms to tech-savvy groups like AQ and the Islamic State.

Brutal and ultra-shocking online content make up just a small percentage of post-modern terror propaganda. Therefore, online censorship must focus on the non-violent media as well; the literature, lectures, rallies, inciteful prayers and *anashid* are as capable of motivating supporters as are the ultraviolent recordings of jihadi viciousness.<sup>187</sup> The 2018 EUROPOL report found that “non-violent material is an integral part of the propaganda message and is in many ways more insidious. Indeed jihadist organisations have long realised the importance of garnering more followers and appealing to those who would otherwise shy away from these groups’ brutality, but who are nevertheless moved by the idea of a global Muslim community (umma) and caliphate.”<sup>188</sup> Broader and more calculated censorship parameters are necessary to minimize the spread of this jihadist discourse; one that has violated the territorial sovereignty of several states, massacred ethnic populations based on religious interpretations, and falsely painted a picture of tranquil governance and contented daily life in the caliphate.

Kinetic military action against known terror media outlets has proven to be an effective countermeasure, albeit a somewhat temporary solution. The EUROPOL report revealed, “the increased military pressure [in the first half of 2017] resulted in a noticeable disruption of its [terrorist] media activities and a marked decline in the quality and quantity of content production.”<sup>189</sup> Although new media outlets are sure to surface, similar to those that emerged later in 2017, and new methods of disseminating propaganda will be discovered, the inciteful messages and misrepresentation of Islamic theology must be prevented. A calculated effort to track and target the electronic footprints of these terrorist media cells will continue to degrade their ability to radicalize and recruit operatives, and to finance their efforts.

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<sup>187</sup> Anashid are chants, sometimes accompanied by percussion instruments.

<sup>188</sup> EUROPOL, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2018*, 32.

<sup>189</sup> EUROPOL, 30.

Continued censorship of traditional media—websites, blogs, and forums—remains a valid strategy as terror groups and individuals seeking anonymity will often move away from the less secure and highly targeted social media platforms. When these new electronic media fail to deliver or become untenable due to law-enforcement censorship, jihadists will default to traditional and known online venues via “media raids” or *pooled* accounts; those established under unrecognizable aliases. These *sponsored* accounts allow operatives and supporters to avoid the registration process and hide their true identity and terrorist affiliation. European authorities have uncovered terrorist communications schemes that involved the use of “archaic” telegrams to discuss potential targeting methods, advertisement, and propaganda.<sup>190</sup> By targeting these old methods in conjunction with new social media platforms and meticulously mapping online terrorist networks via these pooled accounts, law enforcement and intelligence officials can deny jihadis, sympathizers, financiers, and Salafist leaders the secrecy essential to avoiding detection, prosecution, and incarceration.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

In the end, both continuity and change in Islamic-inspired terrorism are of consequence in France. The many similarities between the GIA’s first wave of terror and the characteristics of the millennial jihadis active in France after 2012 provide government officials, law enforcement, and intelligence professionals with a baseline understanding and an operational approach that was extremely effective in dismantling the GIA in France during the 1990s. The religious commitment and self-identifying as a religious warrior are pervasive, and feed the post-modern terrorism narrative. This message matters and its impact must be minimized by soliciting the voices of powerful religious leaders in the Muslim world, as well as the voices of the disillusioned and dejected fighters returning from the battlefields of the failed caliphate. Offensive military action that denies territory to these religious radicals will continue to discredit the hardline clerics and military leaders and minimize the credibility of the prophetic narrative of these groups. There remains a factual nexus between criminals, prisons, and recruitment for

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<sup>190</sup> EUROPOL, 31.

terrorism. To reduce this effect and the number of extremists that it produces, prisons must use calculated deradicalization methods with advanced education for their guards, inmates, and staff.

Additionally, several differences exist—new changes in technology, media, and organizational structure of these terror networks—that must be addressed to design the most effective counterterrorism strategy in today’s swift, interconnected, and digital environment. Today’s “leaderless” jihadi organizational structure makes the detection, penetration, and targeting of terror networks extremely difficult. This reality forces counterterrorism professionals to target known physical entities with the same rigor that dismantled the GIA but also requires a digital pursuit into online media and the message that these radicals are propagating with near anonymity. Today’s online media, chat groups, social media, and blogs give a sense of authority to a distorted Islamic interpretation and promotes an “end times” religious narrative directly to those most susceptible to the message; today’s youth who have continuous access to screens and the Internet. The distorted but influential views of Islamic texts and jurisprudence that appeal to the religiously uneducated or newly converted Muslims must be countered, censored, and targeted. Ultimately, any counterterrorism effort that does not address the current manpower, the pervasive and destructive message, and the online media cannot prevent the infection of today’s youth by this radical message. Simply put, the medium, if censored properly, will disrupt the ability to broadcast the insidious message, and the availability of new manpower will diminish.

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## **V. CONCLUSION**

This thesis has endeavored to develop a relevant theoretical explanation of the increase in terrorist violence experienced in France in 2012–2016. How did this extreme religiously inspired violence begin and rapidly escalate in France? France is a European sovereign nation with inclusive immigration policies, an active proponent of full assimilation for minorities and immigrants, and a non-participant in the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. The French government or the nation’s citizens did not anticipate this spate of jihadist terrorism. Through an investigation into the facts surrounding the terrorist attacks and those responsible for the violence, this thesis identified several key characteristics and motivations of the millennial jihadi, as well as numerous similarities among the significant acts of terrorism perpetrated against the French Republic. The causes of this violence are deeply rooted and often too numerous for an expert to single out just one, or even a few, factors. However, the evidence presented by prominent French authorities, such as Gilles Kepel, Olivier Roy, and David Thomson, points to uniformities in the attacker’s history, his radicalization process, and his definitive act of rebellion against the government and society. The individual, structural, pathological, and religious elements that contributed to radicalization process and incited intense violence clearly represent a new characterization of terror, one that displays qualities dissimilar to the previous violence experienced in the late 20th century at the hands of the GIA. Ultimately, any theory that does not address the underlying structural factors, individual perceptions of grievances, personal choices and assumptions of identity, the psychology of group dynamics, or the extreme religious narrative pervasive in post-modern terrorism, will not be capable of cataloging or countering Islamic-inspired terrorism in the 21st century.

### **A. SYNOPSIS OF EVENTS**

After an investigation into the significant terrorist attacks against France in 2012–2016, this thesis drew a “portrait” of the violent terrorists and a distinct characterization of postmodern religion-inspired terrorism. The majority of these millennial jihadis are segregated, if not alienated. Most of them have criminal records and nearly all furthered their radicalization process in the Salafist incubation chambers of the French prison systems. Few have education

past the high-school level and even fewer come from socially accepted prominent families. Remarkably, nearly all are fatherless or reportedly lacked an interested or engaged father figure in their formative years. All these millennial jihadis were affected by small group interaction and radicalization within that group. Via the Internet, the prison system, or local terror networks and cells, these jihadis were influenced ideologically by an external entity. Every one of these perpetrators of violence in France in 2012–2016 converted to Islam or rediscovered Islam before conducting his defining acts of violence.

The characteristics of each of these attacks are predictably similar as well. Descendants of North African immigrants conducted all these attacks; the majority of these jihadis were born and raised in France. The attacks were remarkably violent and all the attackers fought to the death by utilizing suicide vests in their final acts of defiance or by putting up such stiff resistance in the face of military or law enforcement response that escaping death was not an option or a desire. Individuals who declared their affiliation with known Islamic extremist or terrorist networks and proclaimed allegiance to Allah and the global jihadi effort conducted all the attacks. Most were promptly and proudly claimed by terror networks as martyrs who died in the performance of their Islamic duties while fighting the “holy war” against the West.

## **B. WHY TAKE UP JIHAD?**

### **1. Structural Explanation**

Most of the millennial jihadis discussed in this thesis represented a sub-culture of second- or third-generation immigrants from formerly colonized North African countries. The socio-economic conditions in France during these individuals’ formative years and into their early adulthood were characterized by segregation, government inaction toward minority groups, and a lack of political representation; clearly, the majority of these young adults were indeed victimized by their social environment. Some experts contend that discrimination, marginalization, and wealth inequality usually lead to protests and often rioting, as was the case in France in 2005. However, these feelings of insignificance, perceived or real injustices, and repression have not resulted in a direct leap to the radical religion-inspired violence that took place in France in 2012–2016.



## **2. Individual Choices and Pathology**

Identification with a violent group or an extreme identity or ideology is first and foremost an individual decision; it may be taken with a hope of recovering from a perceived loss of identity or feelings of cultural homelessness, but it is a personal choice nonetheless. Many hundreds of thousands of second-generation immigrants are exposed to the same environmental conditions, repression, and treatment by their governments and societies that influenced millennial jihadis, but only a very small percentage resort to terrorism. Additionally, many individuals, like Maxime Hauchard, discussed in Chapter III, are raised in economically stable households in upscale suburban neighborhoods, and are seemingly integrated into society and its culture. Yet, for reasons beyond structural explanation, they choose to radicalize their views and commit to fighting the global jihad.

## **3. Religion as an Alibi**

Religion, even the twisted radical messages loosely grounded in Qur'anic principles proselytized by neo-Salafists, was not directly responsible for the acts of terrorism analyzed in this thesis. However, in all the cases discussed in Chapter II, these millennial jihadis did not take that final step toward violence until they had professed their faith and openly identified as religious warriors fulfilling their Islamic duty to wage jihad. Additionally, Salafist hardliners, ideologues, and influential proselytizers of Islamic violence are usually deeply convinced, albeit each with his own individual radical interpretations of text, jurisprudence, and Qur'anic concepts. Simons cautions her fellow experts not to focus entirely on the foot soldiers, who may be recent converts to Islam with little knowledge of the faith before conducting their final acts of violence. Alternatively, she advises them to pay particular attention to “the possibility that Islamists want to do us grave harm out of deep spiritual conviction.”<sup>191</sup> As Thomson concludes, the power of religion and its rapid life-altering properties, emotional connections, and deeply felt convictions coupled with “the myth of the favours granted to martyrs cannot be ignored when determining what triggers lead to violence.”<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Simons, “Making Enemies,” 2.

<sup>192</sup> Thomson, *The Returned*, 233.

### **C. THE FINAL VERDICT—TESTING HYPOTHESES**

This thesis found that these segregated youths, when driven away from mainstream society and culture, formed into cliques. The psychology of small group dynamics and the propensity of its members to absorb the most radical ideologies of that group pushed its members, competing among each other, toward violence. The dynamics of these small group social interactions, which provided relevance and restored a sense of significance, identity, and meaning to the members, also provided a religious identity and crisis narrative that served as the final catalyst causing the recent rash of religiously inspired terrorism in France. Whether via prison, terror cell, or the Internet, these groups of individuals provided an insulated and protected environment that successfully translated identity into action. The final step in the terror sequence is establishing a sufficient rationale to perform these heinous acts of violence; actions that do not come naturally to most individuals and often require an ideological or religious narrative as their final justification to act out their hatred via violent exploits. That final step, one that Salafi-jihadist ideology and the “clash of civilizations” narrative has provoked, has served as the final milestone in all the French terrorist incidents studied in 2012–2016. Instead of one individual, socio-economic, religious, or structural catalyst, the causes of Islamist terrorist violence in France can be better understood as a sequence rather than as one singular cataclysmic factor that drives the millennial jihadis toward violence.

### **D. NEW TERRORISM**

The high volume of extreme Islamic-inspired attacks in France, French foreign fighters supporting violent Islamic State terrorist efforts in the Levant, and the low level of assimilation to mainstream French culture by today’s French Muslim youth have quickly become major concerns for security and stability in France. However, none of these concepts differs significantly from the circumstances surrounding France’s first spate of Islamic-inspired terrorism in the 1990s. This second spate of Islamist terrorism, however, features distinctive radicalization methods that include a captivating message of impending cosmic war easily spread via the vastness of the world wide web and a new demographic in the “always on” generation receptive to unprecedented levels of violence. Unless these millennial jihadis are addressed in the proper context of postmodern terrorism, the facts will remain disguised by other fears, emotions,

and prejudices, and the proselytizing messages will remain a significant and pervasive force for evil.

New cases of terrorism can and should be debated utilizing the characterizations and causes presented in Chapter III. Specifically, this postmodern terrorism, which is represented in France in 2012–2016, is highly decentralized—yet with international reach—and is inherently more complex with the addition of computers, the Internet, and social media serving as an inescapable delivery system of a newly propagated global “clash of civilizations” narrative that seeks to promote the image of Islam’s cosmic struggle for victory against the threatening cultures and religions of the West. All the terrorist attacks against the French Republic in 2012–2016 should be categorized in this new postmodern genre of terror.

#### **E. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Without criticizing the response of French government agencies to the rise in terrorism in their country (because they have been successful in preventing large-scale jihadist violence since the summer of 2016), this thesis presents several policy recommendations that may be of use to policy makers and counterterrorism experts as they continue to deal with an unpredictable security environment within their sovereign territory and throughout much of Europe and North Africa. Many civil liberties have been curtailed by France’s extensions of “state of urgency” counterterrorism measures following the 2015 Paris attacks. Additionally, with the invocation of the Lisbon Treaty, France solicited support for its European allies to plan, finance, and conduct counterterrorism missions in the Sahel and North Africa. These counterterrorism measures must continue to be deliberate and to make every effort to achieve a proportional level of response lest they appear to be instruments of repression and thereby feed directly into the extremist narratives.

The French government would benefit from neutralizing the Salafist message with a comprehensive counternarrative. This message must be well crafted, supported by respected Muslims, and given an Islamic face. In other words, deradicalized jihadis would address the youth of France and describe their motivations, their inside experiences with these extreme organizations, and the truth behind the veil of darkness, violence, and misrepresentation.

However, for this message to take root and have positive effects, it will be necessary to clean up the repository of radical media still readily available on the Internet. Counterterrorism experts must target online media with the same rigor that they routinely employ to dismantle terrorist organizations throughout the Sahel, North Africa, and within their own country.

To diminish the manpower that continues to feed these radical terrorist organizations, millennial jihadis and neo-Salafists must be targeted with the same meticulousness. Intelligence collection and offensive military action are crucial to targeting the ideologues in the lawless and ungoverned spaces where they are given safe haven and allowed to foment hatred, plan attacks, and express their hostility to the West. A definitive nexus exists between criminals in the French prison system and terrorism. Corrections officials must take a calculated approach in dealing with this complex problem. They must develop doctrine that incorporates new and creative deradicalization programs, promotes staff education and awareness, and validates new prison protocols to counter the message that is widespread throughout much of the nation's prisons. Finally, any government effort that does not consider the multiple channels of manpower recruitment, the destructive Salafist narrative, and the "always on" online media that are just a few clicks away cannot prevent the infection of today's youth by this radical message.

## **F. FUTURE RESEARCH**

In the course of investigating the French case, it was discovered that all the millennial jihadis studied in Chapter II of this thesis (except one) had no father or were reportedly raised by an unengaged or absentee father figure. Pertinent studies linking fatherless children to criminal and deviant behavior should be analyzed and interpreted to understand better the psychological damage and social stigma that growing into maturity without a father figure may produce in young adults. The research and information on this theory is surely relevant to the French experiences with religion-inspired terrorism in 2012–2016.

The environmental factors, individual motivations, and pervasive ideologies that contribute to terrorism are constantly evolving. Indeed, they are perpetually adding levels of complexity to what already seems like an impossible problem to solve. Since the summer of 2016 (and hence outside the scope of this thesis) layers of fluctuating factors have been added to

the French millennial jihadi problem. The next question to be investigated is what impact military activism has had on the French relationship with terrorism. Is a failing Islamic State caliphate in Iraq and Syria a good thing for France? Will these losses of prophetic battles have a negative impact on the neo-Salafist's radical message? Will these trained and experienced fighters, returning from the battlefields of the Levant as the Caliphate fails, have a significant impact on security and stability in France? The truth is, as Maher concluded, "Salafi-Jihadism remains an extremely resilient soteriology."<sup>193</sup> In other words, it is still a durable doctrine of salvation. The French government, as well as much of Europe and the West, will continue to address this evolving threat for many years to come.

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<sup>193</sup> Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, 211.

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